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# Droppin' Knowledge: Black women's communication and informal learning in an online community

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DROPPIN' KNOWLEDGE: BLACK WOMEN'S COMMUNICATION AND  
INFORMAL LEARNING IN AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

by

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B.A., University of Alaska, 1997

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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This thesis entitled:  
Droppin' Knowledge: Black women's communication and informal learning in an  
online community  
written by Leslye C. Steptoe  
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that both content and form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly  
work in the above mentioned discipline.

Steptoe, Leslye C. (Ph.D., Educational Foundations, Policy and Practice)

Droppin' Knowledge: Black women's communication and informal learning in an online community

Thesis directed by University Distinguished Professor Margaret Eisenhart

The experiences of black women offer a unique perspective on how life is lived at the juncture of race and gender in the United States. This case study of an online community for black women centers on the site's potentiality as an online learning community as well as a uniquely black woman's space. It also explores interrelated aspects of learning and identity development.

Using the Transcript Analysis Tool (TAT), multiple perspectives on the fundamental characteristics of learning communities, and information on common features of black communication, I analyzed 1,593 message board posts for insight into the ways in which black women use informal communication and collaborative behaviors on the site. I discovered that while the site was a dynamic distributed learning community of culture, it also featured several unique structural characteristics (e.g. a high level of identity management, private ownership, explicit status categories, commercial interests, etc.) which made it quite different from conventional online learning communities. I also found the women rejected anonymity on the internet and instead embraced their reality as black women in order to create enhanced opportunities for culturally-relevant learning.

*To Maris, the little girl laughing by the sea. A constant source of hope and strength, I carry you with me always.*

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Background

I began applying for entry into Ph.D. programs with my final choices driven by two main criteria. First, the program had to be broad enough to fit my interdisciplinary interests. Choosing between sociology, education, and history was proving more difficult than I had anticipated, so I sought a program that would allow me to dabble in all three. The second requirement was location—the school's city had to have that special *something* that drew me to it. My childhood was spent in nearly a dozen U.S. states and twice as many cities and I had come to enjoy the different cultures, landscapes, and experiences each new place offered. In a sense, the second condition trumped the first, in that I knew that no matter how seemingly perfect a doctoral program was, I could not bring myself to live in any city that did not speak to me.

Although I had done extensive research on the University of Colorado (CU) during my program search, at the time of my campus visit my idea of Boulder was limited to what I had gleaned from others—its renowned natural beauty and bohemian, liberal vibe—and the 70s sitcom, *Mork & Mindy*. The Educational Foundations, Policy & Practice program and its professors had already won me over; I arrived on campus in April 2003 to give the city of Boulder an opportunity to do the same.

Boulder was as beautiful and charming as I had hoped and August found me settling into a midtown apartment and my life as a first-year Educational

Foundations, Principles & Practice (EFPP) doctoral student. My classmates were friendly, my classes were interesting and my surroundings were, thanks to the altitude, literally breathtaking. It would have been impossible not to notice that the city and the campus were overwhelmingly white, but I did not give that much weight. To begin with, I had spent much of my life in heavily white neighborhoods, schools and/or work environments and had functioned quite well. My best friend of nearly 20 years is white, I regularly date interracially, and I comfortably joke about my own “Heinz 57” background. At first blush, it seemed like a non-issue, especially since I knew that black people are everywhere. If I knew black people in Alaska, of all places, it stood to reason that, even if they were not immediately visible, there had to be black people in Boulder. Still, as days turned to weeks of me being the only black person in nearly every situation I encountered in Boulder, my sense of isolation grew.

It seemed that I had forgotten an important point about how I was able to function as well as I did as the “lonely only” in the past: I had always had an outlet valve. When I was the only black in a class (or at one point, one of three blacks in the entire school, with my half-siblings being the other two) or work, my culture awaited me at home. When I was one of very few blacks (sometimes, the only one) in my neighborhood, I worked in offices that were quite diverse and, once, majority black. My life was balanced; my culture enveloped me for at least part of every day. In Boulder, no such buffer existed and the effort of being simultaneously so visible and invisible eventually began to wear on me until I felt

only slightly less alien than my old pal, Mork. Jackson (2002) captures my dilemma perfectly:

It leaves us "Only Ones" with a challenge: We must integrate without compromising ourselves or our beliefs. We must retain our cultural selves and run the risk of scaring the white folks we work with and for. We must constantly filter our experiences, screening for racism in each moment, while still being a team player. We must be able to culturally navigate both worlds, working side-by-side with folks who are only vested in their own white world. We must teach tolerance or suffer being misunderstood. We must put up with ignorant comments, always picking our battles. We must reach out to other people of color for reality checks.

I desperately needed a reality check. Initially, I turned to the Internet to find a community of graduate students in similar situations. Although I managed to locate several such groups, I found that the heavy focus on academia, while useful, did not offer the kind of support I most needed. I decided that my search might be more productive if it centered on a specific interest I held. I had been considering going natural for nearly two years and explored the Internet for sites that laid out the process and discussed not only the physical transformation but also the political and social context of the decision to wear unprocessed black hair. After several hits and misses, I found Kinks.com.



My first weeks as a new member on Kinks.com were spent exclusively on the *Transition* Boards, mining the threads on the technicalities of an extended transition. My plan was that, each month as new growth came in at the scalp, I would trim off an equivalent amount of processed hair from the ends. Some members transition this way for a year or more; I lasted less than two months. Never a paragon of patience, I paused my morning routine just long enough one day to take a pair of kitchen shears and cut my hair down to approximately two inches of new growth before leaving for class.

Freed from the rigors of transitioning, I began to explore the entire Kinks.com site and was fascinated by what I found. During this time, I was attending a series of seminars as part of the required coursework for my degree. More than once, I was struck by how the level of discourse on Kinks.com compared to that in my formal classes. In my opinion, many Kinks threads (with titles like those I list below) could easily have been conversations plucked from a graduate-level seminar:

- Identity in South Africa
- Black femininity: Why does it seem so different?
- Pregnancy conduct v. fetal rights: Should it be legislated?
- So how do poor women become middle class?
- Weather Modification Board: Playing God with Nature?
- The hidden curriculum in the black classroom
- Dressing sexy at work: Does it work for or against women?

- Zombification: A better or at least cheaper way to deal with criminals?
- Che Guevara: Why all the shirt?
- Guns, Germs and Steel: Why white people rule
- Porn and women's bodies
- Is the fear of gay men a form of sexism?

My entire postsecondary education was spent in predominately white institutions and I had never had the opportunity to discuss critical sociopolitical issues in a higher education environment that had anything approaching a critical mass of minority voices. Further, I had taken only one—one—class with a black tenure-track professor, a male, during my bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs combined. Kinks.com was an exciting new experience for me. My new perspective of Kinks.com, as a space where high level discussions occur between black women, sparked my interest in the community as a potential site of learning and instigated this study.

### **Description of the Problem**

Suddenly it seems that everyone is talking about black women and their hair. It is undoubtedly having, as Northern (2006) calls it, a "moment". In addition to any attention paid by scholars, the last few years have seen black women's hair (and it is almost always black *women's* hair) explode onto the mainstream consciousness. You know this is the case when major news outlets like The New

York Times<sup>1</sup> and CNN<sup>2</sup> feel moved to enter the conversation, when local news stations from Richmond, VA to Chicago run specials on the topic<sup>3</sup>, and when comedian Chris Rock's 2009 documentary, *Good Hair*, makes millions at the box office, garners critical acclaim, wins at Sundance<sup>4</sup>, and gets an hour on *Oprah*. Northern explains:

The currency of the trope of black hair stands at a particular peak in its cultural moment for a few reasons: the commercial hair trade is rapidly expanding; a putative cross-over of black and white hairstyles has emerged; black hair has become the subject of artistic endeavors, museum exhibits and academic inquiries; and a trend of revealing what had previously been (and is still to some degree) considered secrets of black hair processes like weave and extensions has occurred (p.vi-vii).

Black hair may be experiencing its 15 minutes in the national eye now, but it has always been a central issue of black womanhood. The dual subjugation of

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<sup>1</sup> "Black Hair, Still Tangled in Politics"  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/fashion/27SKIN.html>  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/27/fashion/27SKIN.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Why It Matters How Black Women Wear Their Hair"  
[http://articles.cnn.com/2008-07-23/politics/black.hair\\_1\\_black-women-first-black-female-millionaire-black-woman?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://articles.cnn.com/2008-07-23/politics/black.hair_1_black-women-first-black-female-millionaire-black-woman?_s=PM:POLITICS)

<sup>3</sup> WTVR: Richmond, VA  
<http://www.wtvr.com/wtvr-natural-hair-africanamerican-community-20110208,0,1209717.story>  
WPTV: West Palm Beach, FL  
[http://www.wptv.com/generic/news/local\\_news/special\\_reports/the-big-chop](http://www.wptv.com/generic/news/local_news/special_reports/the-big-chop)  
ABC7: Chicago  
[http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=resources/lifestyle\\_community/community&id=7286800](http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=resources/lifestyle_community/community&id=7286800)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1213585/awards>

racism and sexism often comes to a head with regard to the Eurocentric beauty standards that marginalize typically black features, like kinky hair, while it privileges typically white ones (Hill, 2009). How black women live their reality of membership in two oppressed groups is inextricably tied to hair because it “is a visible manifestation of gendered and racial identity” (Rosado, 2007, p. 68) that “has long been part of the discourse of blackness [and] one of many markers that has distinguished and defined blackness itself” (Northern, 2006, p. 19).

Because the Eurocentric ideal of feminine beauty frames natural black hair as the antithesis of femininity (read: whiteness), choosing to wear natural hair is a political statement whether its wearer wishes it to be or not. I, and others (Cleage, 1993; hooks, 1988; Northern, 2006, Rosado, 2007), argue that it is impossible to divorce black hairstyles from history, to separate hair from the body it is attached to. When the cartoonist for the June 2008 cover of *The New Yorker* wanted to convey the alleged radicalism of Michelle Obama, he knew that adding a large Afro to his depiction of her sporting camouflage and a machine gun, would drive home his point.<sup>5</sup> Never mind that Mrs. Obama has never been seen in the public eye with unstraightened hair. When a 2006 incident with Capitol police put Cynthia McKinney, the first black woman elected to Congress from Georgia, in the media spotlight, her natural hairstyle moved syndicated radio host Neal Boortz to rage that her new hairstyle made her look like a “ghetto slut” who

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<sup>5</sup> Image at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/07/13/yikes-controversial-emnew\\_n\\_112429.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/07/13/yikes-controversial-emnew_n_112429.html)

was showing “contempt for the position she holds.”<sup>6</sup> Blacks are not exempt from internalized messages about black hair. For example, in her study of black women’s political reading of other black women’s hairstyles, Rosado (2007) found that the women judged long, relaxed hair as most professional and indicative of higher education and class standing and:

The same women who said they did not think hair could be equated to politics also said the woman with dreadlocks was probably an Afrocentric Black nationalist (37 percent). Similarly, the model with hair that appears to be a natural hairstyle is assumed to be a Black feminist by 34 percent of the survey participants. So in direct contradiction to the survey data that said hair had nothing to do with politics we see that when the women evaluate another Black woman’s hair they assign political meaning to the style (p. 176-177)

Black women comprise approximately 7 percent of the U.S. population but they buy 40 percent of the hair care products sold (Schiavocampo, 2009).<sup>7</sup> Most mainstream haircare goods and services are aimed at black women who straighten their hair, as an estimated 75 percent of black women do (Rosado, 2007). As a result, black women who opt to go natural combat not only a relative lack of sociopolitical support for such a choice but also often find themselves with limited technical and educational resources.

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<sup>6</sup> Media Matters for America, “Boortz: Rep. McKinney “looks like a ghetto slut” March 31, 2006 <http://mediamatters.org/research/200603310005>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thegrio.com/entertainment/the-cost-of-hair-is-sometimes-the-cost-of-beauty.php>

According to Sheila Hale (personal communication, February 7, 2011), who has owned and operated a natural salon and school in Detroit for nearly 40 years, natural hair is often perceived as an urban phenomenon not because black women in other areas do not want to go natural but because the natural haircare goods and services are concentrated in cities with large black populations. Still, even in these areas there is a shortage of trained stylists because mainstream beauty schools, even those that focus on black hair, teach natural hair only in the context of straightening it (Hale, personal communication, February 7, 2011; Natural Nubian, 2010; Noelliste, 2010). After a representative of a “fancy-pants Chicago beauty school” told her, “But you have to understand, we don’t study natural hair here. We study real hair,” Noelliste (2010), a popular natural hair blogger and licensed cosmetologist, asked her readers who had “insider” access to weigh in on why “despite existing in an age where Black celebrities are taking razors to their heads in the name of naturalness—the mainstream beauty industry seems so blind to it all” (p. 1). A licensed Chicago stylist/reader shared her perspective:

The haircare industry is lagging behind its consumers when it comes to natural hair. White companies don’t market to us and the Black companies only teach about relaxers. There is a serious disconnect between a.) consumers who want and need licensed professionals to care for their natural hair, b.) companies that produce natural products but provide no advanced education on

natural hair c.) mainstream product companies that don't even acknowledge the natural movement and d.) stylists who can't/won't access the education to branch into natural haircare (p. 2).

The resulting shortage of stylists and other natural haircare resources has widespread impact on the natural hair community, severely limiting options for networking and knowledge-building. Enter the Internet. The internet often offers black women their best and most consistent opportunity to connect to technical and social support for natural hair (Hale, personal communication, February 7, 2011; Natural Nubian, 2010; Noelliste, 2010). Internet resources are available 24-7 for any natural with a desire to learn and internet access. For example, YouTube currently features 534,000 videos tagged "natural hair", 60,600 on "natural black hair" and 113,000 labeled "natural African American hair". There are 15,000 videos categorized as natural hair tutorials, step-by-step instructions on an aspect of maintenance. Fotki, a popular photo-sharing website, contains 17,000 files listed under "natural hair", "natural black hair" and "natural African American hair". In addition to video and photo-sharing sites like YouTube and Fotki, where naturals can improve technique, several online groups (e.g. Nappturality, Black Hair Media, Long Hair Care Forum, etc.) are spaces for natural black women to build community in an online environment that blends technical knowledge with a sustained social connection. These online communities form organically, as members coalesce around a shared interest or goal, determine their personal level of interaction, and come and go at will.

In contrast with informal online communities like those described above, formal online communities are tied to a course through a conventional system of education. They are marked by a freedom of space, time, and place and privilege collaboration through discussion and peer-to-peer interaction; still they follow a set curriculum and have a person(s) in the official role of teacher (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Dede, 2004; Johnson & Aragon, 2002; Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001; Vonderwell, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1996; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004).

Many black women employ the Internet as a tool to fill in the knowledge and resource gaps they have with regard to the sociopolitical and technical aspects of natural haircare, choosing to build informal online communities within which they can explore their goals in a culturally-responsive environment. While much has been written about formal and informal online communities and the educational overlap between them, less has been said about how these communities look and function as spaces for learning for members of oppressed groups. Still less is known about how black women, specifically, may choose to utilize such spaces. This study will investigate this gap.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this study, the concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) in situated learning provides the theoretical framework in which to situate an examination of the cultural and learning experiences of the black women on Kinks.com. Lave and Wenger (1991) reject the notion that learning is a separate



activity that is primarily a process of internalization and assimilation and instead maintain that learning is an aspect of all activity and is tightly bound to identity development. In situated learning, newcomers undergo a shift in identity at the same time they undergo a knowledge shift as they move towards full participation in a given community. Learning is “subsumed in processes of changing identity in and through membership in a community of practitioners; and mastery is an organizational relationship characteristic of communities of practice” (Lave, 1991, p. 64). The process by which newcomers *learn how to be as they are learning how to do* is called legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000). According to Lave (1991), LPP is a “two-way bridge”:

Newcomers become oldtimers through a social process of increasingly centripetal participation, which depends on legitimate access to ongoing community practice. Newcomers develop a changing understanding of practice over time from improvised opportunities to participate peripherally in ongoing activities of the community. Knowledgeable skill is encompassed in the process of assuming an identity as a practitioner, of becoming a full participant, an oldtimer (p. 68).

Because Kinks.com draws its members from different levels of mastery—newbies and veterans--and the community is also a place with very clearly defined boundaries and goals (discussed at length in later chapters), LPP is a

useful tool for the exploration of the interconnectedness of identity and knowledge on the site and the extent to which there are legitimate opportunities for new learning. In addition, it gives a framework for investigating the tensions that can arise when people at different levels of integration bump up against each other.

### **Description of the Study**

This case study is an exploration of the similarities and differences between Kinks.com and learning communities as described in the literature as well as an examination into the ways in which a specific group of black women use informal communication in learning settings. Four research questions guided the project from the beginning:

#### *Research questions*

- 1) What are the main features of learning communities as described by the literature?
- 2) In what ways is Kinks.com an online learning community?
- 3) What are the main features of black women's communication and learning?
- 4) In what ways is Kinks.com a distinctively black women's online learning community?

During the course of the study, two additional questions became significant:

- 5) What evidence is there of a unique Kink identity?

- 6) What is the relationship between identity-generation and knowledge-generation on Kinks.com?

### *Methods*

Eight (6 main boards, 2 sub boards) of the available 48 (34 main, 14 sub) were analyzed as part of this study. The boards: Crafts, Culture, Hair, Heat, Locs, Styles, Tech Support, and Transition, were chosen because they all had high posting activity and several (e.g. Tech Support) were focused on problem-solving and offered the best opportunity to observe evidence of learning on the site.

All threads on the selected boards that had an initial start date during June 30-October 31, 2008 were included in the initial analysis. Ten percent of the qualifying threads on each board ( $n = 1,593$ ) were then randomly selected for the final analysis phase. Threads were analyzed twice, once on the sentence-level using the Transcript Analysis Tool (TAT), and again on a unit of meaning level to capture content in context. TAT-coded data was directly compared with the data from formal online learning communities in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005), both of which utilized the TAT. Unit of meaning data were analyzed for evidence of culture, identity, learning patterns, level of control on the board, etc.

A total of 15,890 posts were added on the eight selected boards in the 124-day period between June 30-October 31, 2008. 1,593 posts and more than 6500 sentences, were analyzed as part of the study.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has multiple implications for how we understand culture and learning, as well as the relationship between them. It offers insight into the ways that oppressed people may choose to use available resources to fill in knowledge gaps which have resulted from social inequality. Further, it helps us to better understand how people learn informally, especially practical given the current focus on lifelong learning and technological opportunities that facilitate it.

## **Organization of the Study Report**

The study report is arranged into eight chapters. A review of the literature on learning communities, online communities, and black women's communication and online activity are in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes data collection and analysis in detail and Chapter 4 is an ethnographic description of Kinks.com. Findings are split between three chapters: Chapter 5 reports data on online learning collaboration; Chapter 6 gives results of culture and communication data; and Chapter 7 is an exploration of the process of identity generation on the site, using Lave & Wenger's concept of situated learning. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the study and offers suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **YOU COME TO TEACH<sup>8</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

Little research has been done on black women's communication styles, a fact that has drawn pointed criticism from many scholars of color in the field of communication (Allen, 2002; Dorsey, 2003; Gasman, 2007; Hobbs, 2004; Pandey, 2005; Patton, 2003). The dearth of material on black women's speech behavior is disappointing but not all that unexpected given black women's marginalized social status both in and out of academe. The default setting of the "woman" category is often "white woman" and that of the "black" category is "black men;" so, black women's unique station at the juncture of these two groups often goes unacknowledged and unexamined (Bell, 2000; Bonner, 2001; Dorsey, 2003; Gasman, 2007; Hendrix, 2003; Hobbs, 2004; Orbe, 2002; Popp, Donovan et al, 2003; Zamani, 2003). To affirm black women's intersectional reality—that their station at a crossroads of gender and race is likely to make their communication distinctive and important—is to ultimately offer a deeper understanding of all human interaction (Allen, 2002; Collins, 1986; Dorsey, 2003; Scott, 2002).

Yancy (2000) speaks of places that give black women a way to "avoid the white gaze...a temporary reprieve from the white economy of Othering Black bodies" (p. 165). It has been suggested that the Internet is this type of space, and black women have rapidly become dedicated users of the technology. More

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<sup>8</sup> Lucille Clifton, full poem in Appendix B

black women are online than black men; in the years between 2002 and 2005, the numbers of black women increased 30% while black men's online numbers during that same timeframe increased only 4% (Fallows, 2005).

At the same time that numbers of black women online are increasing, so are the numbers of online educational opportunities offered by postsecondary institutions. More than 3.9 million students and over 20% of all postsecondary students in the U.S. took at least one online class in fall 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). For many of today's postsecondary students who were raised amidst rapid and continual technological change, technological skill may be seen as sort of a sixth sense; and, online education can provide institutions with the chance to connect with these tech-savvy learners and also to enrich the learning process through enhanced flexibility in time, place, and pace (Butler & Pinto-Zipp, 2006; Lieblein, 2000; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003; Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001).

Through an exploration of black women's communication on Kinks.com, an informal Internet community, my study's goal is to contribute to the understanding of how learning may occur in different settings. This chapter investigates learning communities; the characteristics and patterns of online learning environments, both inside and outside of formal curricular constraints; and black women's informal communication both on- and offline.

### **Learning communities**

Learning communities turn the traditional view of learning on its ear; standing in sharp contrast to the idea that learning occurs mainly as individual

assimilation of knowledge that is transferred from teacher to student, this framework instead stresses interaction, collaboration and communication and maintains that learners can learn quite a bit from each other (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Dede, 2004a; Johnson & Aragon, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1998). Bielaczyc & Collins (1999):

The defining quality of a learning community is that there is a culture of learning in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding [with] (a) diversity of expertise among its members, who are valued for their contributions and given support to develop, (b) a shared objective of continually advancing the collective knowledge and skills, (c) an emphasis on learning how to learn, and (d) mechanisms for sharing what is learned (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999, p. 271-272).

Collaboration through discussion is an integral part of a learning community (Wilson & Ryder, 1996; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004). Discussion may be extensive and public or direct and private (Wilson & Ryder, 1996) and it may be asynchronous or synchronous (Lieblein, 2000; Piccoli, Ahmah & Ives, 2001; Sullivan, 2001). Interaction in learning communities is threefold: student-teacher, student-content, and student-student and any or all may at the forefront of the learning environment at a given time (Anderson, 2003).

## **Online learning communities**

A key goal of formal education is to prepare students to become active and engaged citizens in the modern world. Given the way that it has come to touch nearly every facet of modern life, it is not surprising that the Internet would become an important tool in reaching this goal. Nearly 4 million students were taking at least one online course in the fall of 2007, a 12 percent jump from 2006. In higher education, the overall student growth rate is 1.2 percent while the growth rate for online students is 12.9 percent and over 20% of all students in U.S. higher education took at least one online class in fall 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Online education is not necessarily better than the traditional learning environment and there are advantages and disadvantages to both formats (Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2004; Vonderwell, 2003; Zhang, Zhao, Zhou & Nunamaker, 2004). For instance, unlike traditional classes which meet at a specific place or time, online learning communities (OLCs) are not limited by geography, the clock or space (Butler & Pinto-Zipp, 2006; Lieblein, 2000; Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001). However, traditional courses offer immediate instructor feedback (Vonderwell, 2003; Zhang, Zhao, Zhou & Nunamaker, 2004) and may be more conducive to building community (Song, Singleton, Hill & Koh, 2004; Vonderwell, 2003).

The actual structure of an online learning community can vary widely in terms of formality, moderation (control), and focus. While allowing that there can



be significant overlap between the features of each, Luppicini (2003) identifies six specific variations of OLC: knowledge building; inquiry; practice; culture; socialization; or counseling and development (see Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1** Characteristics of the six types of OLCs (Luppicini, 2003)

Category	Description	Features	Design Elements
<b>Virtual Learning Communities of Knowledge Building</b>	Allows members to focus on topics of interest and construct communal databases of information	Shared common interest and personal responsibility of contributing to community knowledge building	<b>Emphasis:</b> Individual autonomy and individual expression (strong); opportunities for integrating new ideas and perspectives from outside <b>Moderators:</b> Actively involved <b>Environment:</b> Formal
<b>Virtual Learning Communities of Inquiry</b>	Goal-based orientation among participants that requires active involvement from community members	Shared purpose and active solution seeking	<b>Emphasis:</b> Efforts to understand and collaborate with others; opportunities for integrating new ideas and perspective from outside <b>Moderators:</b> Actively involved <b>Environment:</b> Formal
<b>Virtual Learning Communities of Practice</b>	Based on learning lived practices of the community	Active participation and reflection	<b>Emphasis:</b> Group norms (strong); efforts to understand and collaborate with other participants <b>Moderators:</b> Actively involved <b>Environment:</b> Formal
<b>Virtual Learning Communities of Culture</b>	Based on shared history, common sense of ideology, or ritualistic traditions	Strong group identification and sense of tradition	<b>Emphasis:</b> Group norms (strong); efforts to understand and cooperate with others; invested efforts to document and publicize history, values, and noteworthy actions of group <b>Moderators:</b> -- <b>Environment:</b> Informal
<b>Virtual Learning Communities of Socialization</b>	Based on connecting individuals with common interests or a common background for social exchange	Emphasis on social interaction and entertainment	<b>Emphasis:</b> Group norms (moderate); group identity and attachment <b>Moderators:</b> -- <b>Environment:</b> Informal
<b>Virtual Learning Communities of Counseling and Development</b>	Provides support services to individuals and nurturing individual growth	Empathetic relationship building and concern for human well-being	<b>Emphasis:</b> Individual autonomy and individual expression (strong); efforts to understand and empathize with others <b>Moderators:</b> Actively involved <b>Environment:</b> Formal

An example of a *Knowledge-Building* OLC is a course where students perform an independent review of a series of documents before joining with their peers to make an online database. Math students that have been divided into online discussion groups to explore solutions to several previously “unsolvable” mathematical proofs are taking part in an *Inquiry* OLC. An online course that teaches graduate students to effectively apply the ANGEL learning management system to the Internet courses they are currently teaching is a *Practice* OLC; The Irish Culture Club of Delaware’s<sup>9</sup> online community, which seeks to promote Irish culture and traditions, qualifies as a *Culture* OLC; MeetUp,<sup>10</sup> an online space for those who want to “do something, learn something, share something, [and/or] change something” with like-minded individuals is a *Socialization* OLC; and the community at Wellness.com,<sup>11</sup> where members go to learn how to improve their own health and that of others, is a *Counseling and Development* OLC.

Chickering & Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles provide one of the most well-known frameworks for higher education, designed to set a standard for effective teaching and learning in postsecondary education. The Principles are: 1) encourage contact between students and faculty; 2) develop reciprocity and cooperation among students; 3) encourage active learning; 4) give prompt feedback; 5) emphasize time on task; 6) communicate high expectations; and 7) respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner &

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<sup>9</sup> [www.irishde.org](http://www.irishde.org)

<sup>10</sup> [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)

<sup>11</sup> [www.wellness.com](http://www.wellness.com)

Duffy (2001) use the Principles to create a parallel list of “lessons” for online education (summarized in Table 2.2).

**Table 2.2** Summary of Graham et al (2001) application of Chickering & Gamson (1987) Principles to online courses

Principle	Lesson
Good practice encourages student-faculty contact	Provide clear guidelines—both type and timeline— for interaction with students
Good practice encourages cooperation among students	Facilitate meaningful cooperation among students; “participation” is not enough
Good practice encourages active learning	Require course projects
Good practice gives prompt feedback	Provide two kinds of feedback: information and acknowledgment
Good practice emphasizes time on task	Set course deadlines
Good practice communicates high expectations	Assign challenging tasks and praise quality work
Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning	Allow students to choose project topics that reflect their unique perspectives

In contrast to most traditional educational environments, many online courses carry little to no expectation of face-to-face contact between students and the instructor. Therefore, while setting contact guidelines is always a key part of the instructional process, it is especially important in online learning communities where course participation can vary widely in time, frequency, and geographical location. Faculty in Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner & Duffy (2001) shared that they although they wanted to be accessible to online learners they

also wanted to avoid being inundated by e-mail messages or discussion board postings. Without clear guidelines concerning the type of acceptable communication (e.g. Please refer all technical support questions to the HelpDesk, not the instructor) and timeline for response (e.g. I will respond to e-mails on Tuesdays between 3-5 pm), online learners can begin to feel ignored or frustrated by lack of instructor contact (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner & Duffy, 2001; Lieblein, 2000) and instructors can feel overwhelmed. To decrease the risk of this, some institutions have instituted an official e-mail policy for online faculty (Leiblein, 2000).

Traditional learning environments are necessarily limited by space and other dimensions, while online environments can offer learners control over the time, place, and pace of instruction and access to virtually unlimited supplemental resources, including archives that make sharing knowledge simpler (Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001; Vonderwell, 2003; Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker, 2004). For example, students in a traditional class often have little tangible access to the knowledge generated by previous cohorts, while online learners with access to a discussion board can tap into years of archived class discussions quite easily; and, online students can print a full transcript of a recent class discussion while traditional learners are dependent on notes taken during class.

Regular assessment allows learners to self-reflect so that they may focus on closing gaps in their knowledge (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). As in their

traditional counterparts, formal assessment in online courses can take many forms. Some instructors give online exams, some hold proctored exams on campus or in other locations, and some give the equivalent of a difficult, “take home” exam (Lieblein, 2001; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003). BlackBoard, WebCT, ANGEL and similar programs give students online feedback about their assignments, allow for class discussion and chat, and provide space for instructors to add notes, comments, and supplemental materials (Lieblein, 2001; Lu, Yu & Liu, 2003).

Although Internet-mediated instruction carries a high degree of freedom, it is not a free-for-all. Teacher supervision is still an important part of the instructional process, which shows learners that the instructor is both present and actively engaged in the learning process (Griffin & Anderton-Lewis, 1998; Leiblein, 2000). Regular deadlines also help to keep students on task and create opportunities for ongoing contact with the instructor and classmates (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner & Duffy, 2001).

Online instructors can communicate high expectations by assigning challenging tasks, providing sample cases and praising high quality work (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner & Duffy, 2001). The students in Griffin & Anderton-Lewis (1998) were challenged by a requirement to “cold” contact an individual in their assigned country and persuade them not only to respond to an unsolicited e-mail from a cultural outsider but also to then agree to be interviewed. An instructor in Graham et al. (2001) brought in examples of good

work from a previous semester to communicate her expectations to her current students.

Online education with asynchronous communication gives students unprecedented control over their learning. One aspect of this control is flexibility in time and place. Students may access instructional material from anywhere at any time, they can review or skip a topic, and can bend class time to fit the demands of their personal or work lives (Lieblein, 2000; Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001; Sullivan, 2001). They can even squeeze a little coursework in between flying sorties in the Gulf War (Lieblein 2000)! Flexibility was the most frequently cited positive characteristic of online education (Butler & Pinto-Zipp, 2006; Lieblein, 2000; Lu, Yu, & Liu, 2003; Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001; Sullivan, 2001).

Asynchronous communication also allows for different learning styles and skill levels. For example, some online courses allow a learner to set their own pace, reviewing a topic as many times as he or she wishes or skipping ahead when the topic is one they already know (Piccoli, Ahmad & Ives, 2001). Online communication can also be used to accommodate different personality types including shy and quiet students who may find the online environment more welcoming than traditional classrooms and may appreciate the lower-pressure opportunity to reflect before speaking (Lieblein, 2000; Sullivan, 2001).

A final dimension that is not an explicit part of the Seven Principles in Chickering and Gamson (1987) but is pertinent here is evaluation. Formal instruction requires an official means for students to evaluate the instruction they

have just experienced; and, like traditional educational settings, online courses also incorporate some teacher evaluation mechanism. Further, students may be more likely to complete course evaluations if they can do so online and with protected anonymity (Lieblein, 2000).

### **Distributed Learning Communities**

In its most basic sense, *distributed learning* is that which is distributed across geography, time and interactive media (Alavi, Marakas & Yoo, 2002; Dede, 2003). Distributed learning communities (DLCs) emphasize all three parts of the term: *distributed* (participants are spread across time, place, and technologies), *learning* (knowledge generation) and *community* (collective effort and shared control). In DLCs the management of what is taught and learned is shared among all members of the community; there is a clear commitment to the generation and sharing of knowledge; activities are flexible and negotiated within the group; community members are autonomous; there are high levels of communication and collaboration; and goals are shared (Wilson & Ryder, 1998). Clearly some (but not all) OLCs are also DLCs. However, an OLC that is simply a traditional course (e.g. lecture with notes or handouts, little discussion, few collaborative opportunities, strict instructor control, prescriptive curricular framework, etc.) transferred online would not meet the definition of a DLC.

Learning in any DLC typically follows a particular 7-step pattern: 1) articulating the problem or need; 2) seeking help in a group forum; 3) engaging in a help consultation; 4) assessing learning; 5) sharing the solution; and 6)



archiving the interaction for future reference. The seventh step is repeating steps 1-6 or any part of them as necessary until new knowledge is integrated (Wilson & Ryder, 1998). However, there is some variance in DLC structure; they may be bounded (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam & Dunlap, 2004) or dynamic (Wilson & Ryder, 1996).

A *bounded learning community* (bLC) forms within a structured instructional environment that relies on formal education, with an official instructor and specific curriculum. Participation is required and student choice (of instructor, classmates, timeframe, etc.) is relatively limited (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2003). The pre-service teachers in the “Technology Applications in Education” course in Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam, & Dunlap (2003) participated in a typical bounded learning community. While learners had many opportunities for student-student and student-instructor communication and shared knowledge generation, the course had a recognized instructor as well as a fixed timeframe (one academic quarter) and a prescribed curriculum based on the International Society for Technology in Education (ITSE) National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS).

*Dynamic learning communities* (dLCs) are groups of learners that rather than be under the direction of formalized teaching or instructional design choose instead to “self-organize” into functioning learning communities (Wilson & Ryder, 1996, p. 801). These communities are learner-centered and learner-run and

allow members from various backgrounds and skill levels to contribute to the learning process (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Dede, 2004a; Oblinger, 2008).

Due to their decentralized control system, dLCs have both positive and negative characteristics. A focus on the collective's goals rather than a fixed path makes it easier for dLCs to adapt to changing group needs and this kind of flexibility also means that diverse personalities, learning styles, and ideas that cross disciplinary or conceptual boundaries are more likely to be respected and/or assimilated into the group. Conversely with no "official" expert in a dLC, these learning environments must overcome the obstacle of pleasing community members with different levels of expertise. New or lesser skilled members may become overwhelmed and those with higher skills may become exasperated or bored (Wilson & Ryder, 1998). dLCs may also suffer from short-term inefficiency in the early stages, as members try to plot the group's course and the decentralized control and lack of predictability that can be an advantage in terms of flexibility and diversity can become a hurdle in situations where having a clear leader could make for smoother, faster decision-making and conflict-management (Wilson & Ryder, 1996).

In "Dynamic learning communities: An alternative to designed instructional systems," Wilson & Ryder (1996) use an engineering workgroup as an example of the type of dLC that they have observed firsthand. In this scenario, a distributed group of R & D researchers work on products for which there are no finalized standards and no official repository of standards-related questions. They

find that generic skills training is too general, customized training and support programs take time, staff, and money to develop, and locating experts to lecture on a product that is still in development would be difficult and/or prohibitively expensive. Their solution is to form a dLC in which members pose problems, publicly collaborate on a solution, and archive the answer for future use. There is no formal curriculum, no official instructor and no specific timeframe for learning. The group is wholly learner-centered and learner-controlled.

Wilson & Ryder (1996) also mention another specific type of dLC: the internet discussion group. The Internet, they say, is a “petri dish” that allows many informal learning cultures to “sprout up” independent of traditional instructional constraints (p. 805). These are the dynamic learning communities that most interest me, online spaces like Luppicini’s (2003) Culture and Socialization OLCs and Sloep’s (2008) ad-hoc learning networks that do not require a classroom, set curriculum, or control by a formal instructor, ones that may actually have no overt connection to formal education at all, that “pop up between the cracks of established learning programs...where learning is needed, but where formal instruction, for whatever reason, is not available” (Wilson & Ryder, 1998).

Wilson & Ryder (1996, 1998) and others seem to suggest that such a space could easily exist. Anderson (2003) for example, proposes that effective learning will occur if any *one* of the three types of learner interaction—student-

student, student-teacher, and student-content—is present and sufficiently strong.

His equivalency theorem holds that:

Deep and meaningful formal learning is supported as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; student-student; student-content) is at a high level. The other two may be offered at minimal levels, or even eliminated, without degrading the educational experience.

High levels of more than one of these three modes will likely provide a more satisfying educational experience, though these experiences may not be as cost or time effective as less interactive learning sequences (p. 3).

It has already been established that learning communities can take place anywhere and need not be confined to the classroom (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Dede, 2004a; Wilson & Ryder, 1998; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman; Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004). Any space is a learning space; learning can occur “anywhere, anytime” (Oblinger, 2008) and “since both formal and informal learning can result from interaction between and amongst students alone, or as [the] result of interaction between student and content, the participation of a teacher cannot be the defining feature of an educational interaction” (Anderson, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, although Anderson’s theorem may most directly apply to formal learning, it might be successfully extrapolated to suggest that internet discussion

group dLCs with strong content and/or high-level community interaction may be able to overcome the absence of a formal instructor relatively easily.

The average undergraduate with a 15 credit hour course-load spends only 9% of the time available to them each week in class.<sup>12</sup> Triple that for those who faithfully follow the rule of thumb that every hour spent in class requires two additional hours of preparation (CU Academic Handbook) and the average undergraduate student still spends the vast majority of their time outside of the formal educational environment. So what happens to learning when the classroom is empty or the computer screen goes blank? This is a question I asked myself as I spent increasing amounts of my non-classroom time on Kinks.com. I knew that I was learning on Kinks.com as surely as I was in my classes, but was the site a dLC as previously described in the literature? Did its being a space by and for black women distinguish it from other dLCs? And, if as Wilson & Ryder (1996) claim, internet discussion groups and other dLCs will “eventually have profound implications for how we think about learning and instruction” (p. 805), what implications could Kinks.com have for our understanding of online learning?

### **Black women’s informal communication**

Black women’s talk is “the meandering rhythms, the hyperbole, and the novel metaphors of the casual kitchen-table discourse of...women friends and family members” (Nelson, 1990, 142). It is “flat and broad and wild with

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<sup>12</sup> 15 hours is approximately 9 percent of the 168 hours in a week.

unexpected flowers, like fields in Alabama....peppered with *ain't gots* and *don't have nones* and *I done beens* and *she be's* and *he be's* the way mine is when we are sweet color among coloreds and don't have to worry about being graded" (Smith, 2003, p. 2). It is pride in the creativity that African slaves used to cobble together a dialect as strangers in a strange land (Meacham, 2000). For many, black women's talk (and black talk as a whole) is about the way it makes them feel, the warmth of community and comfort and identity that they draw from it (Boone, 2003; Flowers, 2000; Hughes & Heuman, 2006; Meacham, 2000; Nelson, 1990; Scott, 2002).<sup>13</sup>

Black women have used their social, cultural, historical, political and religious reality to create their own language (Troutman, 2002). Scott (2002) suggests that they even use specific words (e.g. *look* and *girl*) to emphasize their unique group membership. In "Conceiving the Language of Black Women's Everyday Talk," black women consistently use "look" and "girl" immediately preceding a code-switch when issues of identity and solidarity arise. *Look* was used when they spoke of their interactions with whites and seemed to be

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<sup>13</sup> St. Louis rap artist Nelly's debut album (and first single), *Country Grammar*, play up the fact that his "grammar bes ebonics" and is, I think, a clever example of how many black people take much pride in their linguistic creativity and its cultural import with little regard to the mainstream's attempts to denigrate it and despite having command of standard English. (I have heard Nelly in interviews and know that he can speak SE quite well when he so chooses.)

I spent a good chunk of my childhood in and around St. Louis and I can still remember the pleasure I felt when I heard *Country Grammar* on the radio for the first time while living in San Diego. The song contains several references to predominantly black St. Louis neighborhoods and landmarks and the video's scenes are immediately recognizable to anyone who's spent any time in those areas. Still, even though I don't have a "St. Louis accent" myself, I know a lot of people who do; and, it was Nelly's accent and pronunciation that made the strongest impression on me—it felt like home.

employed as a type of cultural warning, to let whites know that they had crossed a line.<sup>14</sup> Black women used *girl* when they were comfortable in the knowledge that they would be understood because they were among sisters who would validate their identity as a black woman.

There are many real-life examples of how black women use their language as a marker for solidarity in their informal communication with other black women. On her live set CD, *Experience: Jill Scott 826+*, Scott converses with her audience after singing “Getting in the Way,” her hit song about a confrontation between a man’s current and ex-girlfriends. From its opening line (Sistergirl, I know you don’t understand), the song establishes that the conversation is between two black women, both in the way the main character addresses her rival (i.e., *Sistergirl*, *Sugar honey girl*, *Queen*, *girlfriend*), and the use of informal “black woman’s talk” throughout. Scott’s public persona, with her natural hair and neosoul vibe, have earned her a reputation (however accurate) of being “positive,” which is slang for a black person who is assertively “pro-black” and is also presumed to have vegan/vegetarian, pro-marijuana, politically active, anti-establishment, alternatively spiritual or any number of other “hippie” tendencies. “Getting in the Way,” with its confrontational *sister-versus-sister* theme that seemingly runs counter to some people’s idea of what a “positive” person represents, created a mild backlash amongst some fans. Scott addresses

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<sup>14</sup> I maintain that “look” is used as an all-purpose “break it down” tool for many black women. In my experience, if you can push a black woman to say it, whichever words that follow are very unlikely to be Standard English!

this controversy in her exchange with the live audience, continuing to use informal black woman's talk for maximum effect:

Well, if they had listened to the lyrics in the first place, they wouldn't have any questions [audience laughs]. Tried to tell a story [exaggerated throat clearing]...**First Verse:** I come very *ladylike* [audience laughs; Scott laughs softly with a slight edge and pretends to be talking to another woman] *Sista*. Giiirrrll [audience laughs]. Ummm...I know you don't understand but *ya gon' have to* [audience laughs]. **Second verse:** It gets a little more...*serious*. *Sugah. Honey. Gurl* [audience laughs]. I don't talk about whippin' nobody's ass 'til the bridge [audience laughs].

With the motto "Where black women come first," Essence Communications Inc. presents itself as a sort of one-stop-shop for black women, a place where they can go to be understood and inspired by their own. As the first and longest-running monthly publication for black woman, *Essence* magazine has considerable social, political and economic weight that it often puts to both explicit and implicit use (e.g. dropping "But, still, this is Essence" during an interview to persuade a notoriously tight-lipped Beyoncé Knowles to be more forthcoming about her private life).<sup>15</sup> *Essence* also has a sizeable online presence, with content that is a mixture of reprinted *Essence* magazine articles and pieces written especially for the website.

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<sup>15</sup> For the record, it worked.



Hobbs (2004) used data from both *Essence* formats to investigate the different ways that black women use language, particularly in the ways they use a formal form of BE. She found that the magazine's Internet form, which allows direct interaction with members of its intended audience, "speaks with its own voice" and purposely uses language styles that evoke black communicative traditions like repetition, alliteration, and emotional appeals to offer itself as an "African-American discourse space in which the cultural norms of the African-American community are discussed and reproduced" (p. 10). Still, even when *Essence* uses formal English as it does in its print version, it is often flavored with a style that marks it as uniquely black. For although the print format uses Standard English, it is not "culturally neutral or 'White,'" instead it "incorporates elements of the African-American verbal style to produce formal English that is distinctively African-American" (p. 7).

A review of more current print and online *Essence* articles support Hobbs' claim. Despite using Standard English almost exclusively, the print version often "code-talks" to black women, dropping coded language into its formal style that will be immediately recognizable to its intended audience. For example, an examination of the September 2008 issue reveals an editorial titled *I Know I've Been Changed*, a popular gospel song; a book review section tagged *By Any Means Necessary*, a term strongly associated with civil rights leader, Malcolm X; a relationship segment called *Let's Stay Together*, a hit 1972 song for R&B/Soul artist, Al Green; and the aforementioned Beyoncé Knowles interview is titled *I Am*

*Legend*, which is a nod to Will Smith's 2007 movie of the same name. A regular contributor to the Essence.com *Entertainment* tab, Byrd (2008) freely uses black woman's talk in her celebrity interviews. Although the language is still primarily Standard English, she takes care to flaunt her membership in the same community as her audience: peppering an interview with actress Sanaa Lathan with references to *money, power and respect*,<sup>16</sup> *Ms. Sanaa*,<sup>17</sup> *Do Right Men*,<sup>18</sup> and Eddie Murphy's 1988 movie, *Coming to America*<sup>19</sup> and another with actress Kerry Washington with phrases such as *concrete rose*,<sup>20</sup> *educated sister, vote-or-die*,<sup>21</sup> and *hypeman*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lyrics from a Lil Kim rap song

<sup>17</sup> Adding Ms., Miss, or Mrs. before a woman's given name is a often used form of respect in the black community; but it is also used in both positive and negative signifying. *Hmmph, look at Miss Thing!* can be both a compliment (You sure are looking good today!) and a slam (I *know* you don't think you look good!).

<sup>18</sup> "Do Right Man" references a 1960s Aretha Franklin song.

<sup>19</sup> More than 20 years after its release, references to *Coming to America* are not uncommon. For example, I recently helped my black female colleague resolve a computer issue that was delaying electronic submission of her completed dissertation. The next day, she left a voicemail on my office phone to invite me to lunch, her treat. The message began with her singing, "She's the quueeeen to beeee!", a play on a line from the movie, as a way of telling me how grateful she was for my assistance.

<sup>20</sup> "Concrete rose" is taken from a poem by Tupac Shakur, the late poet/rapper/actor, in which he alludes to his own "rags to riches" story. The term has come to describe people, especially blacks, who have triumphed over impoverished beginnings and negative expectations.

<sup>21</sup> "Vote-or-die" refers to Sean "Puff Daddy/Puffy/P-Diddy/Diddy" Combs' voter registration program; it also fits the model of \_\_\_\_\_-or-die, meaning to be so "down" with a particular cause or person as to see no other possible option.

<sup>22</sup> A "hypeman" is charged with revving up the crowd during a hip-hop performance. This consists mainly of jumping around frenetically and repeatedly shouting monosyllabic phrases into a microphone. Though it may seem like an easy gig, it takes a surprising amount skill. Bad hypemen do exist and are mercilessly clowned or roundly ignored by the audience.

How black women speak to each other may not simply reflect different conversational tones, word choices, and cultural allusions. It may suggest something more, that black women may see their talk as being *fundamentally different* than that of white women. In “When black women talk with white women,” Houston (1994) explores some of the ways that black women perceive their talk to differ from that of white women. Participants were prompted to describe “black women’s talk,” “talking like a black woman,” “white women’s talk,” and “talking like a white woman.” In describing their own talk, black women stressed characteristics such as forthrightness, self-esteem, knowledge, and common sense and white women emphasized pronunciation, appropriateness, and acceptability. When asked to describe the talk of the other group, black women depicted white women’s talk as arrogant, trivial and passive; white women described black women’s talk as informal and structurally inaccurate. Each group tended to cast their own group in a positive light and the out-group’s talk in a more negative way.

From this, Houston concluded that black women not only see their own talk as more positive than their white counterparts, they also see it as distinctively different, choosing to privilege the interpersonal content of their communication over its style. To them, “Black women’s talk” or “talking like a black woman” means using language to build relationships and gain a social voice. From this perspective, a variety of language styles—BE, Standard English, or some blending of the two—still qualify as talking like a black woman.

Black women are right to see their language as flexible, as informal BE, which is the vernacular most closely associated with black Americans, is only one such tool available to them (Flowers, 2000; Hobbs, 2004; Morgan, 2002; Pandey, 2005; Redd, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Scott, 2002). Black women have knowledge of different codes and the ability to shift between them in order to navigate the different communicative worlds they in which they live (Bell, 2000; Flowers, 2000; Houston, 1994; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Morgan, 2002; Scott, 2002). This type of speech “flip-flop,” code-switching, helps black women to plot a course for the “cultural border crossings” (Scott, 2002, p. 56) that they must undertake daily. Knowing how to cross borders is essential for Black women, whose membership in two marginalized groups makes them particularly vulnerable to stereotyping and forces many to leave their homes in the morning to enter a world that sees them as inferior and alien. They have learned that they must find a way to nurture their attachment to BE while simultaneously maintaining the ties they have built in the mainstream world (Rahman, 2008; Rickford & Rickford, 2000).

### **Black women online**

“You know,” the creator of Renaissance Black Woman website laments, “being Black in America leaves you very little room to truly be yourself without appearing to be “uppity” or “too Black.” Indeed, places where black women can have open discussions relatively free from the constraints of society’s judgment on the structure and content of their speech are limited. School and work are

rarely such safe spaces (Brown, 2007; Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, et al., 2004; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Martínez Alemán, 2000; Moyer, Salovey & Casey-Cannon, 1999; Rosales, 2003); however, the Internet opens a world of possibilities—a user can go online to be instantly linked to a seemingly endless array of people, places, and things in ways that would have been nearly unimaginable less than a generation ago. Googling the search term “black women website” generates links that generate more links that generate still more links, until one is exposed to literally hundreds of blogs and websites made by black women for black women. A range of specialized interests is represented, including family & parenting (e.g. Mocha Moms; Cocoa Familia; Black and Married with Kids), entertainment (e.g. Young, Black & Fabulous; Crunk & Disorderly; Bossip; Honey Soul), politics and social issues (e.g. AngryBlackBitch;<sup>23</sup> Black Women Vote!; Light Skinned-ed Girl; Keeping Up with the Huxtables<sup>24</sup>) and finance (e.g. Diva on a Dollar) alongside scores of general interest sites.

For many people, the internet is a means to cultivate community and to connect with others with similar interests, values, and goals (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Uslaner, 2004; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). In part due to the internet’s relative anonymity, many people feel that they are able to show their “true” selves online, free from many of

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<sup>23</sup> The blog’s author takes politics and racism head on, beginning with her tongue-in-cheek title, which is a jab at the ABW stereotype.

<sup>24</sup> The family’s surname on the 80s sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, is Huxtable.

the social restrictions and/or shortcomings that constrain them in everyday life (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Green, 2002). Relationships that form as a consequence of online group membership can be marked by an intimacy and trust as authentic as that of their offline counterparts (Carter, 2005; Uslaner, 2004) and these connections enhance rather than supplant “real world” affiliations (Carter, 2005; Tyler, 2002; Uslaner, 2004; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). In fact, there is often overlap between members’ on- and offline lives, notably in the tendency to transition online relationships from the internet into life off the screen (Kennedy, 2004; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

When they go online, people do not “shrug off a lifetime of experience and practice learned within the multiple socio-economic and cultural contexts that they inhabit” (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007, paragraph 14) and, anonymous or not, online identities cannot be divorced from their offline context (Wilson & Peterson, 2002; Kennedy, 2004). Online lives are “often continuous with offline selves, not reconfigured versions of subjectivities in real life” (Kennedy, 2004, p. 860). This is especially pertinent when we speak of black women’s online selves because while it may well be true that many *people* are drawn to the internet for its layer of relative anonymity, for *black women*, an online community may be more valuable for the anonymity it does *not* provide.

This idea that black women may use their online communication differently than other groups is supported by Knadler's (2001) experiences with students in a composition course with an internet component at a historically black women's college. A feminist perspective on women's online behavior might expect that the women would embrace the Internet's anonymity as an opportunity to "disappear," temporarily unburdened by race and gender. Knadler's students took the opposite approach, turning their online portfolios into sites of resistance where their identities as black women could be celebrated rather than denigrated, and to use their experiences to seek connections with other black women. This behavior does not mean that black women are somehow unaware that part of the Internet's allure is its promise of anonymity. Rather, they "are not indifferent to the pleasure of cyborg role-playing, [but] they do not have the privilege to see anonymity as 'cool' because they frequently feel coerced to be racially anonymous in their everyday lives" (p. 236):

They see themselves for the first time not as Other, not as different, not as token, but "normal." Such a pleasure of self-recognition may be about the transgression of dominant social norms, but it is not about the pleasure of transgression as a solipsistic end in itself. In going online with their portfolios, students likewise sought to extend this same bounded relation to other "sisters" in the networked community (p. 244).

Like the undergraduates in Knadler (2001), black women may turn to online communities like Kinks.com as places where they are seen, heard and valued in the way they rarely are elsewhere and where they can “engage in spiritual and physical communal praxic forms of resistance that help to define who they are and what they’re capable of becoming” (Yancy, 2000, p. 165):

This online think tank serves as a cyber roundtable where black women, identify, organize and strategize solutions for societal issues that impact the empowerment of black women...together, we will delve deeply into the core issues (sociological, economic, political, psychological, intra-racial and cultural) that impact the self-actualization of black women in this country and in our original homeland (Black Women, Blow the Trumpet! homepage)

[This is] a blogsite for the praising of all things beautiful and sublime in honor of all black women...to speak the truth of black women’s history and accomplishments in America” (Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters homepage)

[Mocha Moms is] a support group for mothers of color [and] serves as an advocate for those mothers and encourages the spirit of community activism within its membership (Mocha Moms homepage).



The pro-woman of color stance of these and similar sites is clear and seems to suggest that they hold learning and shared knowledge as a common goal. *Black Women, Blow the Trumpet!* bills itself as a “cyber roundtable” for learning about one’s BlackWoman-ness, members of *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters* are surely expected to learn history, and *Mocha Moms*, if they are not already community activists, will certainly be taught how to become one. Still, do these and other sites like them (e.g. Kinks.com), which exist primarily as a social tool, also qualify as learning communities?

## **Conclusion**

Black women occupy a place at the juncture of two marginalized groups and historically their experiences, including the ways they speak and learn, have been lost in research that takes “woman” to mean “white woman” and “black” to mean “black man” (Bell, 2000; Dorsey, 2003; Hendrix, 2003; Orbe, 2002). As the Internet has grown so, too, has black women’s presence there (Fallows, 2005) and many have cultivated online communities to provide a space for black women to come together in a common goal. Kinks.com, the focus of my study, is such a community.

Learning communities (LC) are not restricted to the classroom; indeed, they can occur anywhere that groups of people come together (Anderson, 2003; Oblinger, 2000; Wilson & Ryder, 1998). They are learner-centered and stress meaningful collaboration and communication while working towards a shared knowledge goal (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Johnson & Aragon, 2002;

Vonderwell, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1998). Most online learning communities have a prescribed curriculum and official instructor in order to achieve this; however, some, which are described as dynamic distributed learning communities or dDLCs, are not necessarily bound by these constraints. In these communities, control is distributed among all members of the group—no one is the teacher because everyone is (Wilson & Ryder, 1996).

My study will investigate whether Kinks.com can be accurately called a learning community according to Luppicini's (2003) types of OLCs, Wilson & Ryder's (1996, 1998) work on the features and learning patterns of DLCs, and other characteristics as found in frameworks for defining a learning community. In addition, I will explore how a particular group of black women's informal communication styles may impact how they use the internet and how they learn online.

## CHAPTER 3

### CODED LANGUAGE<sup>25</sup>

#### Site analysis

Data for this study consists of Kinks.com discussion threads. I collected posts on several boards to determine which characteristics of learning communities, if any, exist on the site and to explore instances of a specific group of black women's learning via informal communication. Collection focused on eight boards;<sup>26</sup> six main boards: *Crafts*, *Culture*, *Hair*, *Locs*, *Tech Support*, and *Transition* and two sub-boards:<sup>27</sup> *Heat* and *Styles*. These boards were chosen because their explicit focus on problems and solutions (e.g. craft procedures, product recipes, technological skill, hairstyling technique, etc.) would allow for more straightforward evaluation of the presence or absence of learning community characteristics as presented in the literature (i.e., problem posing, shared knowledge generation, solution sharing, discussion management, range of learner expertise, etc.).

The *Crafts* board includes questions and tips about creating and selling handmade products. *Culture* includes discussions about the sociopolitical realities of black American life. *Hair* contains questions and advice about natural hair; its *Heat* and *Styles* sub-boards concern questions and advice about the

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<sup>25</sup> Saul Williams, full poem in Appendix C

<sup>26</sup> As of May 21, 2010, Kinks.com has 34 main boards and 14 sub-boards.

<sup>27</sup> These are sub-boards to the *Hair* main forum.

practice of heat-styling natural hair and technical support for creating natural hair looks, respectively. Technical support and discussion for dreadlocks<sup>28</sup> and other hair-locking methods are on the *Locs* board. The *Technical Support* tab holds general board operation FAQs and the *Transition* board is for targeted support for the journey from relaxed to natural hair. Combined, these boards provided a good perspective of Kinks.com's potential status as a learning community.

Activity on the selected boards from June 30, 2008-October 31, 2008 was collected. With the exception of threads that generated no responses, every post in every thread on the eight boards that met the baseline criteria—having a start date between June 30, 2008 and October 31, 2008—was included in the initial count. After all qualifying threads were collected, 10% of the total number of posts on each board were selected using a random number generator. The resulting number of posts was coded.

I captured only the text of the post and accompanying smileys,<sup>29</sup> if they added necessary clarification or emphasis to a poster's words. I used bracketed text to communicate smiley usage, (e.g. smile, eyeroll, or hug), rather than reproduce the actual smiley image. All graphics and text were removed from

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<sup>28</sup> *Dredlock*, spelled without the "a", is a modern variation of the word, often chosen to reject any suggestion that kinky black hair is "dreadful." Both variants are commonly shortened to *loc* or *lock*.

<sup>29</sup> Smileys are small graphics, often animated, used on the Internet to add humor, clarification, or emphasis to an online comment. They are often variations of the ubiquitous yellow "smiley face" icon but also include other formats. Among the familiar smileys that you are likely to see on most sites, Kinks.com has several that fit the sites focus; for example, a brown smiley face with an large afro.

threads to minimize storage space requirements and to make them more easily manipulated in NVivo. No editing of spelling or grammar occurred.

There was no difficulty in gaining access to the website for the study. To the contrary, Teena, the site's owner, was an enthusiastic advocate of the project and was excited that Kinks.com had drawn academic interest:

**Re: Request for Permission to Study Site**

Dear Leslye, I am so honored! To know that Kinks.com has helped you so much is something that truly warms my heart. I just love what the website has grown into and every day I see it growing more and more, into the place I intended it to be. Of course you have my blessing to conduct your study and I look forward to hearing your analysis and commentary on the phenomena that Kinks.com has become. Please go ahead and I am very excited for you. Much love, ~Teena~

**Procedure**

Using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software package, data was coded into four main categories: 1) Online Learning Collaboration, 2) Control, 3) Black Women's Informal Communication and 4) Black Women Online. Data was coded twice, using two different methods. Four codes in the first category used the Transcript Analysis Tool (TAT), which was applied on the sentence level. Every sentence of every post was analyzed using the TAT tool as explained in detail below. Additionally, the same posts were coded on the multi-sentence

“chunk” level for all remaining codes. Sentence level coding allowed me to compare my results to those in other TAT-coded studies but it could not accurately capture the full meaning of a passage on racism, an example of code-switching, a thoughtful opinion on one’s black identity, etc. Multi-sentence coding allowed for the preservation of important contextual information in these exchanges.

Interaction, collaboration, and communication are the hallmarks of learning communities (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Dede, 2004a; Johnson & Aragon, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1996). Learning communities integrate learners with different levels of expertise (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Dede, 2004a; Oblinger, 2008; Wilson & Ryder, 1996) and new knowledge is shared and archived for future use (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Wilson & Ryder, 1998). The *Online Learning Collaboration* category was designed to measure the level of learning interaction and collaboration on Kinks.com.

#### **Group 1: Online Learning Collaboration codes**

Codes 1.1-1.4 used the transcript analysis tool (TAT) for the analysis of collaborative online learning interactions (Crawford, Ally, Fahy, Cookson, et al., 2000; Fahy, 2003). The TAT classifies sentences in online transcripts into five main categories: 1) questions; 2) statements; 3) reflections; 4) scaffolding and engaging; and 5) quotations and paraphrases/citations. The ratios that were calculated from the total number of occurrences in each category allowed a

range of comparisons (e.g. between TAT categories, between discussion boards, between different online learning communities, etc.).

### 1.1. Questioning

1.1.1. **Vertical questioning:** Emphasis was on data acquisition. These questions assumed that a correct answer existed and were directed to the person(s) who was most likely to have it (e.g. “How do you add pictures in your signature?” *Tech Support*).

1.1.2. **Horizontal questioning:** The primary intent was to initiate dialogue and collaboration. The correct answer was not assumed to necessarily exist but, if it did, it could be negotiated (e.g. “How has your hair surprised you?” *Hair*).

### 1.2. Statements

1.2.1. **Non-referential statements:** The speaker aimed to provide information or to correct a presumed error in reasoning and/or lack of information. No dialogue or collaboration was usually sought; there was a “correct” answer and the speaker believed s/he had it. Speaker did not refer to another person’s comments. For example: “Nasabb Christmas in July Sale: 50% off online orders—July 18<sup>th</sup> 2009 only” (*Products*).

1.2.2 **Referential statements:** The speaker made either direct or indirect reference to preceding comments: “But honestly, just like MochaChocaLatta said, if you hadn’t mentioned it, I wouldn’t have known that isn’t how it’s supposed to look.” (*Crafts*).

1.3. **Reflection:** The speaker provided insight into normally guarded internal thoughts and experiences with the presumption that others would respond with empathy and/or support:

What initially lead me to the decision of going natural was to rebel against what society had taught me and other people of color. I grew up believing that my skin was too dark and my full lips and wide nose were ugly AND that all of my sisters that prettier than me (I am the darkest of 5 girls). Because of this belief, I took pride in having long, straight hair because people always admired it. I remember thinking, “at least something about me is pretty, even if it isn’t my face.” Isn’t that a horrible way for a little girl to feel? Eventually I started to realize that my lack of confidence was what made me unattractive and that my hair had nothing to do with my beauty. I looked deep within myself to discover what I (not society/family/anyone else) thought was beautiful and now I know that being comfortable in my skin and with the hair texture God gave me is what I find most beautiful. I am embracing my ebony skin...the beautiful shade of molasses I am and giving thanks for the naps that God so graciously bestowed upon me. He didn’t make any mistakes when he created me, so why should I chemically alter perfection? (*Transition*).



1.4. **Scaffolding and engaging**<sup>30</sup>: The speaker “warmed” the environment by using personalized support strategies (e.g. calling on or naming others, referring to others’ previous comments, quoting or citing another member, recalling shared group experiences, using smileys and humor, etc.): “Good luck with showing your family your BC when you get home! I’m sure it looks gorgeous! [grin]” (*Transition*).

The knowledge integration and archiving characteristics of learning communities (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Wilson & Ryder, 1998) was covered by Codes 1.5 and 1.6.

1.5. **Assessing learning**: Statements indicating that knowledge had been successfully integrated (e.g. “I did it! WHOOOP WHOOOP! thank you all for all the advice” *Styles*).

1.6. **Sharing solutions**: Statements indicating that a solution had been found and would be available for future reference (e.g. “See: [url of earlier post]. ‘Adopt a Newbie’ thread for matching up transitioners with ‘veterans.’ HTH!”<sup>31</sup> (*Transition*).

Dynamic distributed learning communities (dLC) are marked by their decentralized control system, meaning that learner self-organization and negotiated learning activities replace formalized teaching and instructional design (Wilson & Ryder, 1996). *Control* codes expanded on this concept to include how

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<sup>30</sup> My study combines TAT categories four and five into Code 1.4 because I think there is a strong overlap between the two.

<sup>31</sup> HTH = Hope this helps

closely certain user freedoms such as expression of group norms and identity, opportunities to bring outside ideas to the site, openness towards innovative and non-conforming perspectives, etc. were managed on the site (Luppicini, 2003; Wilson & Ryder, 1996).

## **Group 2: Control codes**

2.1. **Moderator control:** Instances of active involvement by Kinks.com moderators: “Dominican ‘blowout’ = styling with heat. Closed.” (*Heat*)

2.2. **Board filters:** Instances of the website automatically filtering out words that had been identified as anti-Kinks philosophy. An example of this was the perm/relaxer→chemical fire cream transition that occurred whenever a Kink typed in one of the former terms: “That was Summer 2007. Since then, I haven’t even touch a chemical fire cream and I’m so proud every time I rock a ‘fro at my uni!” (*Transition*)

2.3. **Sharing outside sources:** The degree to which members were allowed to bring in new perspectives from outside the site and also instances that outside sources were integrated into the learning community (e.g, “Hey, try searching for ‘flat twists tutorial’ on YouTube. I think a visual aid will work better than written instructions in this case [smile]” *Styles*).

2.4. **Autonomy and self-expression:** The extent to which individuality and/or non-conformist perspectives were accepted:

maybe you shouldn't have mentioned the fla.t<sup>32</sup> ironing and blowdrying b/c the mods will close your post. one time i posted a question about whether or not it was safe to blow dry if you did it on a cool setting and i got shot down and shut down!!!!!! (*Heat*)

2.5. **Group norms:** Direct or indirect references to what it means to be a Kink, what sets Kinks.com apart from other sites, etc. The category included efforts to document the group's history and mission as well as cases of identity management such as the "we don't do that here" statement in this example: "I Know We Don't Talk About This On Kinks.com But...is it safe to blow dry it or just continue with air drying?" (*Heat*)

*Black Women's Informal Communication* codes reflected the characteristics of black women's informal speech (Boone, 2003; Flowers, 2004; Hobbs, 2004; Houston, 1994; Scott, 2002).

### **Group 3: Black Women's Informal Communication codes**

#### **3.1. Solidarity and black identity:**

3.1.1. **Culture Call:** Coded language to highlight shared black cultural knowledge (e.g. the user name, Whitley Gilbert, references a main character on the 80s sitcom, *A Different World*, a HBCU-based spinoff vehicle for Lisa Bonet's character on *The Cosby Show*. Whitley was a spoiled, upper class princess type, whose personality is often used as shorthand for a high-class, high maintenance black woman).

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<sup>32</sup> The word "flatironing" is written "fla.t ironing" here because the word is changed into "flaming hot tool of hair torture" by the board's filters in line with the site's anti-heat message.

3.1.2. **Girl:** Use of the word “girl” as a mark of shared black female identity (Scott, 2002) as seen in this exchange on the *Culture* board:

**Crazy Betty:** I think we might be talkin’ about the same person. That’s my girl forever and a day and shes one of those ppl who don’t give a damn what folks think about her. It just hurt my heart to see her out there like that cause shes **MAD COOL**.

**Seawolf:** yes, “Diva” is madd cool, that’s my girl and she does have that attitude which i love. the past is the past for her. folks just gotta use discernment...

3.1.3. **Look:** Use of the word “look” as a type of warning, to signify that a boundary has been crossed:

The guy who twist my hair keeps saying its too short on lower back part and they won't keep, but my question is "if you can twist it for single coil, why can't yo start my locs" he said, he uses diff products to start the locs, meaning no brown gel I guess. Should I just say look, I'm paying you start my damn locs? Or just have his boss do them? [unsure] [unsure] [unsure] (Mushroom\_head, *Locs*, 7/08)

3.2. **Code-switching:** Instances of mixed BE and SE within a single post

3.2.1. **Formal BE:** Use of SE “flavored” with repetition, alliteration, and other characteristics of informal black verbal style (Hobbs, 2004) as in the

following example, where the speaker began the sentence in SE but switched to slang (i.e., for a good minute) to finish:<sup>33</sup>

thanx added it to my calendar, i've always wanted black soap and  
i've been stalking their site for a good minute (*Products*, Chocodile,  
5/09)

**3.3. Talking like a black woman:** Comments about how black women's talk is different than that of others, particularly white women, as well as general statements about the way black women talk. "Like my grandma would tell me, 'Gal, HUSH!'" (*Culture*)

*Black Women Online* codes covered statements that revealed how black women use the Internet, including the perceived significance of Kinks.com as a uniquely black space, examples of online relationships being transferred to the off-line world, how being black and female is experienced online, etc.

#### **Group 4: Black Women Online codes**

##### **4.1. Building online relationships:**

4.1.1. **Perceiving the site as uniquely black:** Statements about the perceived worth of Kinks.com community: "But thanks Tee again this site is truly a blessing and has helped out so many woman love their natural hair." (*Hair*)

4.2. **Being a black woman:** Statements about how living at the intersection of race and gender affects one's perspective:

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<sup>33</sup> The unconventional spelling of "thanks" and the lack of capitalization are "Internetese", not BE.

We've all seen them. Some of us might be guilty of forwarding them. But what I'm starting to realize is that seeing these 'Hot Ghetto Mess' emails hurt me more every time one gets sent to my inbox. I'm tired of seeing my black folks as the perpetual butt of the online joke...I recognized a girl I knew in one of the emails. It was sad and I wondered if she knew pictures of her were circulating the net. . What do you think of the emails? (*Culture*)

**Table 3.1:** Coding categories in relation to research questions

R2: In what ways is Kinks.com an online learning community?	R3: What are the main features of black women's communication and learning?	R4: In what ways is Kinks.com a distinctively black women's online learning community?
Assessing learning	Being a black woman	Being a black woman
Autonomy and self-expression	Code-switching	Code-switching
Group norms	Group norms	Group norms
Moderator control	Solidarity and black identity	Perceiving the site as uniquely black
Questioning	Talking like a black woman	Solidarity and black identity
Reflection		Talking like a black woman
Scaffolding and engaging		
Sharing outside sources		
Sharing solutions		
Statements		

## **Conclusion**

We know that learning communities can be distributed across geography, time and interactive media (Alavi, Marakas & Yoo, 2002; Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Dede, 2004a; Oblinger, 2008). In these communities, the management of what is taught and learned is shared among all members; there is a clear commitment to the generation and sharing of knowledge; activities are flexible and negotiated within the group; members are autonomous; there are high levels of communication and collaboration; and goals are shared (Wilson & Ryder, 1998). Dynamic distributed learning communities can take this even further by allowing groups of learners to self-organize entirely outside the bounds of formalized teaching or instructional design. If online communities can be dLCs (Wilson & Ryder, 1996; Luppiciini, 2003, Sloep, 2008), it is possible that Kinks.com may qualify as such a space.

Using the TAT transcript categories along with codes that reflected the characteristics of learning communities, distributed learning communities, and dynamic learning communities as described in the literature, my study identified which of these features, if any, are shared by Kinks.com. Additionally, it explored how the website's position as a community made by and for black women may influence the interactions that take place there.

## CHAPTER 4

### TO THOSE OF MY SISTERS WHO KEPT THEIR NATURALS-NEVER TO LOOK A HOT COMB IN THE TEETH<sup>34</sup>

*So...I ask in the spirit of community, what has Kinks done for you? (Hair)*

#### Introduction

While Kinks.com certainly may have *felt* a million miles away from the weary life of a fly in a sea of buttermilk, the actual travel effort required is considerably less...a few keyboard strokes take you to [www.kinks.com](http://www.kinks.com), Kinks' home on the Internet. Structurally, the community is comprised of eight major components: Homepage, Registration, Grooming, FAQ, Shop, Advertising, Boards, and Archives. Culturally, Kinks have very specific ideas about who they are and what they do. This chapter explores both the structural and cultural aspects of Kinks.com, with greater attention given to the structure of the site as its cultural characteristics are discussed in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

#### Structure

##### *Homepage*

The Kinks.com homepage is a busy place filled with photos, animations, advertisements, articles, etc. Upon arrival, one's eye may first be drawn to the page's header. Here, Kinks takes its first opportunity to define itself: "Kinks.com," the banner announces, "Black African American Natural Hair Resource." Lest this initial written declaration leave room for confusion over the site's mission and intended audience, its design serves as visual punctuation to the message. The

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<sup>34</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, full poem in Appendix D.



header is decorated with a large illustrated version of the group's name, with the "K" done in broad, sweeping strokes and a lock of hair serving as an underline. It is not straight, not wavy, and not curly; instead, the hair undulates with its many tight bends and bumps. This is kinky hair. The remaining two-thirds of the space is taken over by a large patterned area done in a combination of creams and chocolates that resemble African mudcloth and the entire header is bordered underneath by a repeating line of classic, 70s-style Afro picks.

Superimposed on the Afro pick border are six hyperlinks: Home; Boards; Grooming; FAQ; Shop; and Register. The area immediately beneath the header, which comprises another 10% of the page, is divided into three areas. There is a main menu that offers more hyperlinked shortcuts (Home, About Kinks, Kinks merchandise, Transition, Advertising) and an as yet blank space marked "Members Area." The focal point is an animated space that lies between the menu and member's area. In it, four teasers are on automatic toggle: one invites you to become a paid subscriber (i.e. a PINK KINK) to enjoy greater site access and fewer advertisements for \$20 a year, another announces the group's Twitter, the third advertises the "Mall" where one can shop for Kinks-friendly items, and the last encourages members to start a Kinks blog to document and share their natural journey. Two of the ads carry illustrations;<sup>35</sup> both are black women. The first, which accompanies the subscription prompt, is of Nappertiti (Image 4.1).

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<sup>35</sup> Three including the Twitter logo, however I do not include it in the count because it is a corporate logo that is unassociated with Kinks.com.

**Image 4.1** Nappertiti



Nappertiti is a sketched bust of the site's owner, Teena, done in profile. Her hair is swept up into an afro puff and she wears large hoop-style earrings. The image was dubbed Nappertiti as a lighthearted nod to the famed bust of Nefertiti, an Egyptian queen. Nappertiti frequently appears throughout the Kinks site, often in black silhouette, and can also be purchased as a gold-tone pin. The shop teaser uses a detailed color cartoon of a stylishly dressed, natural-haired, middle- to upper-class appearing black woman carrying shopping bags (Image 4.2).

**Image 4.2** Shop Illustration



The remainder of the page is made up of three columns. The left column holds the “Popular” box, an animated scrawl that constantly updates the most active threads or articles. Beneath the ticker is the first of several login prompts and a “Register” hyperlink. A Nappertiti-watermarked box titled “From the Blogs”

is next and shows a list of six recent blog posts, updated daily. The balance of the left column is filled with advertisements and appeals for subscriptions and donations. Most advertisements appear to be targeted specifically to natural haired black women, touting goods that are “for multi ethnic women & girls,” “certified organic,” and “dedicated to beautiful African American hair” and illustrating their ads with photographs or color drawings of black women in a range of skin tones and hairdos. Google Ads, text only with hyperlinked titles, fill the rest of the column. Unlike the ones above them, these ads are not targeted to black women, natural hair, or black women with natural hair. They are generated by a global keyword search (e.g. use of the word “hair,” mentioning a particular brand name, etc.) and by the location of the user’s IP address. No ads have sound.

The right column of the homepage also has advertisements, two large full color ones for recognizable corporate brands like Verizon and AT&T. The rest of the space is filled with member photos and information. The “Afro Pic” section at the top of the column showcases a random member-submitted photograph of her natural hair. The photo changes each time the page is refreshed. The ten most recently logged in members, along with each woman’s photo and hyperlinked screen-name, are in the “Just Logged In” box below this. Clicking a screen-name takes you to a member’s public profile. Both the “Afro Pic” and “Just Logged In” sections automatically update when the page is refreshed.

A large full-color Nappertiti and her tagline “There is no greater beauty than the real you” accompany *Nappenings*, the middle column and largest section of the homepage which Teena uses to share thoughts and information with the larger community. This area is divided into six segments, only two of which regularly change. The first of the non-static sections is tagged “Feature Article,” and showcases a member-authored piece on black culture. The current feature is “White Women Dyeing vs. Black Women Relaxing: Why it’s not the same thing” by Baduism. A hyperlink at the bottom of the page allows you to view a list of past features. The second segment contains the most current notice from Teena. Today, she asks paid subscribers whose names are not bolded in pink throughout the site (one of the benefits of subscribing) to contact her so that she can help resolve the situation.

The fixed areas of this section are: 1) a non-titled site introduction; 2) Where to Start? 3) What is KinkThink? and 4) Why KinkThink? Taken together, these sections form the foundation of the Kinks mission and identity. The brief introduction describes Kinks.com as a place to find resources for the “care, maintenance and politics” of black hair in its natural state and encourages visitors to “join the community and meet some new friends!” Teena’s tone grows serious in the other sections, as she carefully lays out the Kinks ideology. In “Where to Start?” she warns that being “deeply embedded in the **straight hair mindset** [emphasis in original]” will make going natural a challenge but it is one that Kinks are prepared to help new members negotiate. She adds:

If you are still relaxing your hair you are welcome here, however be warned...We don't debate the wonders of relaxing and we don't talk about the benefits of chemical or heat straightening on Kinks because frankly, there aren't any benefits. Just be aware that those of us here who are kinky are committed to being kinky and spreading the word of KinkThink. **We don't like relaxers** [emphasis hers]. And we don't sugar coat that fact.

"What is KinkThink?" asserts that many black women throughout the African diaspora are choosing to wear their hair in its natural state for a wide range of reasons and that Kinks are in different phases of KinkThink, which is the process of moving from accepting a straight hair mentality toward rejecting it. According to Teena, Kinks have three common desires: to have healthy and beautiful natural hair, to see pictures of other natural-haired women, and to have a smooth transition to natural hair.

The Kinks mentality extends beyond straight vs. natural, it also privileges a specific type of natural hair. "Why KinkThink?" explores their reasoning behind the preference for the kinkiest hairtype:

The reason it is limited to [tightly coiled, highly textured Black hair] is because we have found that it is the hairtype most feared and vilified in our community. It's the only hairtype we can't stay natural with for long with if we "fear the fro." [This] is the type labeled "bad" nappy hair that needs to be "fixed." This perception needs to

change. We need to learn about [it] and see [it] on women who have embraced it. And the only way we can do that is to showcase [it] on its own merit without seeing it compared with other hairtypes. KinkThink is about acceptance...and not carrying false expectations about what it can and can't be or do. It's not about taking the easy road and conforming. It's not about destroying [it] through continual straightening. It's about accepting yourself and your hair as it was intended to be. **That's what KinkThink is** [emphasis in original].

### *Registration*

Only registered members may post and they have access to more forums and fewer advertisements. The Kinks registration process is a straightforward, three-step application-review-confirm process. The homepage registration shortcut takes you to a fillable form which requests basic information (e.g. name, e-mail address, etc.) as well as screen-name and password preferences. In addition, the prospective member is asked to choose which information beyond the screen-name (e.g. hometown, birthday, hobbies, signature quote, etc.) should be visible in her public profile. As the final step before submission, the potential Kink must indicate that she has read and accepted the Kinks.com terms and conditions.

The official *Member Terms of Use*<sup>36</sup> is approximately two pages long and starts with legalese. The reader learns that the term “discussion forums” encompasses not only the boards but the blogs and chat rooms too, and also any comparable conversation outlets the site may make available in the future; that the site administrator is free to change the document at any time at her discretion and that a member is responsible for keeping herself abreast of any such changes; that you cannot use the site for commercial or illegal activities; and that posted views belong to the individual and Kinks.com will not be held legally accountable if you read something that causes you dissatisfaction, discomfort, disgust, or to feel just plain dissed.

Although the site disavows any legal liability for contentious or confrontational posts, this does not mean that such statements are unchecked. The remainder of the document is a catalog of behaviors that comprise conduct unbecoming to a Kink and can lead to removal of a member’s posts, suspension or revocation. These offenses include:

- Discourtesy to other members, including foul language
- Posting of racist or pornographic material
- Not taking into account the range of backgrounds and expertise of those reading the boards
- Posting under another person’s username and/or pretending to be someone else

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<sup>36</sup> Full document in Appendix E

“Thank you for registering on Kinks.com,” the message on the bottom of the registration request tells future members, “We look forward to meeting you!” The form is then sent to site administrators for review and, if approved, a welcome message is sent to the e-mail address of record. The message contains a hyperlink to the site that must be used to complete the registration process and confirm that the registrant is an actual human being and not a spambot, a computer program used to inundate a discussion board with ads, pornography, or viruses. Once confirmed, the new Kink is given access to all non-subscriber areas of the site.

Kinks are encouraged to build a public profile as one of their first post-registration steps. A profile includes several sections that allow a member to share as much or as little information as she likes with fellow members. It also allows her to track her own posting activity (e.g. post cost, threads started, etc.) track other Kinks’ activity, make friends and contact lists, send and receive private messages, and see who has visited her page.

### *Grooming*

Visitors to this area of the site, accessed from the “Grooming” shortcut on the homepage are met with a photograph (Image 4.3) depicting a hairbraiding session:



**Image 4.3** Grooming page photograph



The image of these two women lovingly nurturing hair that is of the most maligned type, one soon to give birth to a member of the next generation (and presumably pass on her appreciation for “bad” hair), gives more support to the Kinks.com mentality. The words that accompany the photograph further drive home the point:

For too long we have been subjected to negative myths about our hair which have bee [sic] propagated for generations. Now it’s time to take control of your hair [emphasis in original]. The general information in the articles below will help you better understand our wonderful hairtype and how to care for it in ways to help it stay healthy and strong to grow to lengths you never thought possible.

The articles are 21 undated hyperlinked items listed by title, author and number of hits. These are the same articles that are listed in the Feature Articles link on the homepage. Using the “Title Filter” function, a user can customize the list by number of articles shown, keyword, author, etc. Articles are varied, including profiles of natural-haired celebrities (e.g. T’Keyah Crystal Kemah,

Tempestt Bledsoe), styling techniques (e.g. “Tips for All Hairtypes”, “Super Short Styling,” “Afro Puff: New variations on an old classic,” etc.), investigative reports (e.g. “10 Ingredients to Avoid,” “10 Chemicals to Avoid,” “Relaxer Truths”) and health (e.g. “Healthy Eating,” “Bad Water,” etc.). All but two of the articles (“White Women Dyeing v. Black Women Relaxing: Why it’s not the same thing,” which is the current homepage Feature, and “Natural Hair and Culture”) were written by Teena and all 21 articles have several thousand hits, from 4,743 to 22,862.

### *FAQ*

The FAQ page (Image 4.4) is subtitled “Kinks’ Frequently Asked Questions: and terms you may not be familiar with yet” and is done in a Q&A style. It covers approximately 20 topics like definitions of terms, technical information, and debunking myths. Teena maintains the “constant work in progress” and offers a disclaimer that the answers “are from my personal experience and are offered as personal, not professional advice.”

### Image 4.4 FAQ screenshot



*Shop*

Those in the mood for a bit of retail therapy can head to the Shop page, where a welcome message assures them that the products and services they see are “KINK friendly and recommended.” The focal point of the page is an animated shopping center (Image 4.5). The stationary background is a mall scene complete with indoor landscaping, storefronts and window displays. The wallpaper is either a photorealistic drawing or an actual photograph, possibly a stock photo. The store name that is clearly visible in the image does indeed belong to a real business, which Google informs is a high-end fashion clothing chain headquartered in London. Several advertisements for featured products

swiftly rotate in midair against this backdrop. Clicking on any stops the carousel, clicking again restarts it.

**Image 4.5** Shopping Center screenshot

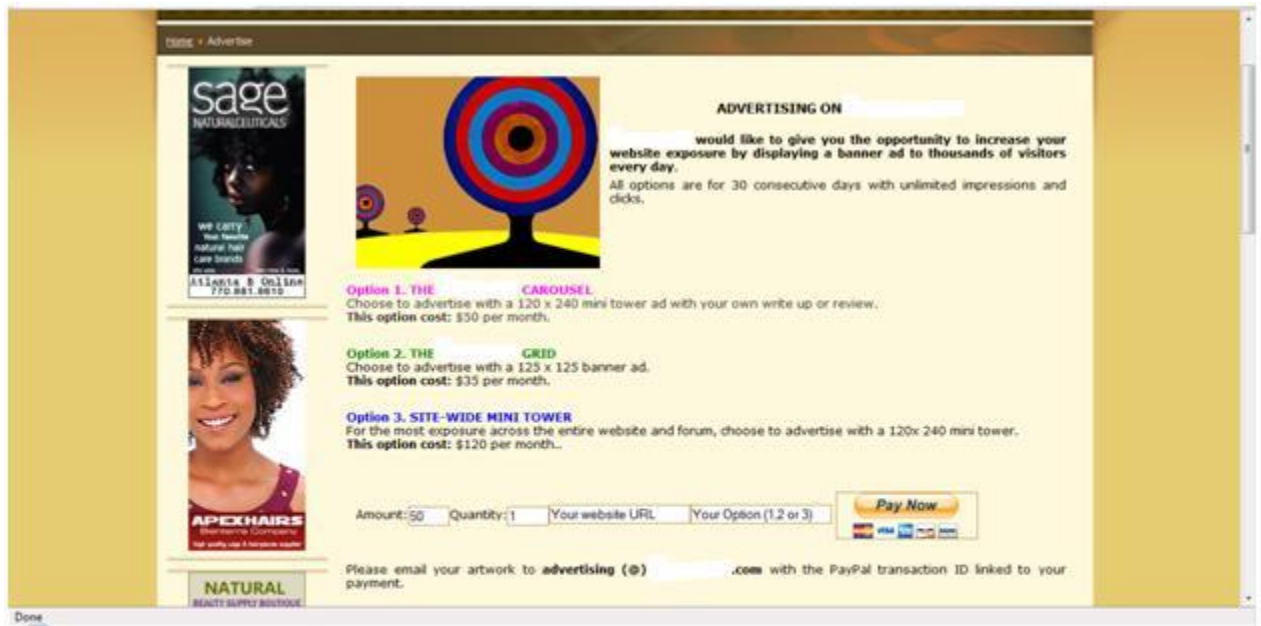


## *Advertising*

Below the mall display is a section with more flyers for things that are “friendly” to naturals. Of the six current advertisements, five promote goods and services such as an African American children’s book club and t-shirts with Marcus Garvey’s reprimand, “Don’t remove the kinks from your hair. Remove them from your brain.” In the sixth, a black woman with a short natural hairstyle encourages businesses to advertise on the site. A shortcut to the site’s advertising page, which lays out the terms and fee structure for advertising on

Kinks.com, is provided at the bottom of the current group of advertisements (Image 4.6).

**Image 4.6** Advertising page screenshot



## Boards

The discussion boards are the centerpiece of the Kinks.com universe. “Welcome to Your Journey” heads the main page, which offers a full list of all boards and offers a variety of access tools with which to navigate and or link into them. Members can check private messages or update profile information in the *User CP* (control panel) and *FAQ* sends you to the same Q&A section that can be accessed from the homepage. The *Community* link contains social groups, photo albums, a member’s personal contacts & friends lists, and a complete

Kinks member list. The *Search* feature can be used for a simple keyword search or an advanced search narrowed by a specific variable (e.g. date, screen-name, board, etc.) and/or customized search results (i.e. show threads or show posts). The *Quick Link* shortcut is currently non-operational. A link for the community's Facebook group and its iPhone app join the shortcut lineup and provide tech savvy Kinks two additional options to stay plugged in, even on the go.

Forums are divided into five areas: 1) Supporters Area, 2) Kinky Hair, 3) Products, 4) Special Topics and 5) General Interest. To date, there are 48 boards in use: 34 main boards and 14 sub-boards (e.g. the *School & Work* main board has a sub-board for *Hair-Work Issues*). Each discussion board is listed by name, followed by a brief description of the board's content and/or purpose and the number of people currently viewing the board. Sub-boards are hyperlinked directly below their parent board. Image 4.7 contains a screenshot of a portion of the Kinky Hair section of the forum list.

Image 4.7 Partial forum list view



At the bottom of the complete forum view is an area titled “What’s Going On?” which tracks site activity, the number and screen-names of people currently logged in, and the screen-names and ages of the day’s birthdays. The screen-names of Pink Kinks, subscribed members, are in a bolded bright pink font wherever they appear.

Which boards a user sees and what actions she can perform in them is determined by registration status and/or subscription status. Administrators have more access than subscribed members who have more access than regular registered members who have more access than unregistered users. Administrators have free rein on the site and can read and post anywhere they

like, they also have the authority to delete or modify threads as they see fit and are the only Kinks allowed to post in the *Heat*<sup>37</sup> forum and designate a thread as a “pinned.” Subscribed members enjoy a private area called the “Pink Ladies Lounge” and have more site privileges (e.g. uploading photos, immediate ability to post in every forum, etc.). Descriptions for subscriber-only boards are immediately followed by: POSTING FOR SUBSCRIBED MEMBERS ONLY.” Currently, there are four boards with immediate posting limited to subscribers: *40s+*, *Commercial Products*, *Swap Meet*, *Fashion*, and *Home & Garden*. Regular members can read all threads except those in the subscriber lounge and may post in the *Commercial Products* board after reaching the 100-post mark (posts in the Life forum do not add to the post count).<sup>38</sup> Non-registered users’ access is fully limited; they cannot read the boards and can post in none.

When a non-member (or a member who is not logged in) visits the Kinks forum, all boards are accompanied by an icon of a padlock, meaning that posting is closed to that user. *The Pink Ladies Lounge* forum is unlisted and the “last post” section of all boards with the exception of *Blogs*, *Homemade Products*, *Commercial Products*, *Activism*, and *Genealogy* is marked “Private.” Immediately upon logging in, however, a Kink is met with a warm “Thank you for signing in

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<sup>37</sup> The *Heat* forum is actually an archive. When members post about their negative experiences with flatironing, pressing or other straightening methods, these posts are moved to the Heat archive to serve as a warning to others.

<sup>38</sup> This is a maneuver to block those who may join with the sole purpose of shilling a product. It would be difficult to amass 100+ posts in a short period of time without drawing the attention of a moderator and/or members who are not shy about calling out a new Kink who appears to be posting simply to “get their count up.”



[screen-name]” and is led to a forum view that has been transformed from the pared down one unregistered visitors see. To start, the “last post” column is now in full view for all boards and new icons have appeared in the first column of the forum view. The padlock has been joined by two Afro picks, which make up the main page’s legend (Box 4.1). For subscribers, the only padlock on the page appears beside the *Blogs* forum as no one is allowed to post in a blog except for its owner. Image 4.8 shows the same section of the forum list, as seen by unregistered (top) and registered members (bottom).

**Box 4.1. Main forum view legend**

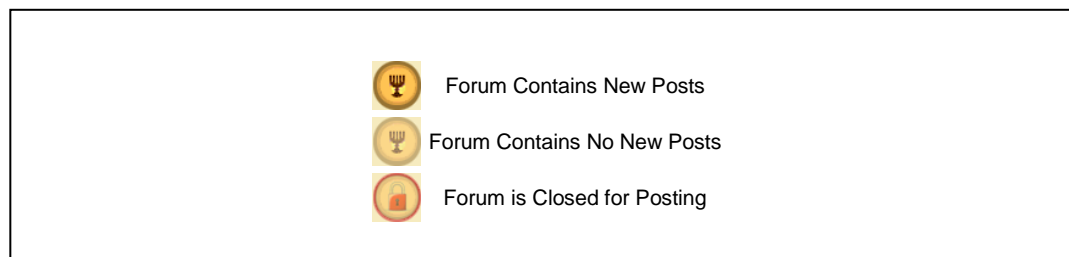


Image 4.8 Forum list view by log-in status

Inspirational.

- by

African American Perspective - Black Perspective?

- by

The 3 Stages of Hair Growth

- by

So upset about what happened today

UPDATED with PHOTOS

- by

Single Strand Knots...munch!

- by

Natural Hair and Power

- by

Any GREEN LOCKERS

- by

Have you received a money compliment today? PL. =)

- by

Happi Friendlies



Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts
<b>Hair</b>			
General discussion about your natural hair experiences.			
<b>Introductions</b> (6 Viewing) New members, introduce yourself to the Naptural Community here. We'd love to hear your story!	<b>Im transitioning and I need...</b> by [user] Today 09:14 AM	3,946	18,115
<b>General Chat</b> (34 Viewing) General chat about the Natural Hair Lifestyle	<b>The 3 Stages of Hair Growth</b> by [user] Today 10:09 AM	24,306	466,202
<b>Help Me With My Hair!</b> (16 Viewing) This is the place to ask for advice or questions for specific help with styles, techniques, combating dryness and for those new to natural hair. Also the place to post your own styling successes!	<b>Single Strand Knots...munch!</b> by [user] Today 09:55 AM	2,070	23,286
<b>Sub-Forums:</b> <b>Style Workshop</b> <b>The Hot Comb &amp; Blue Dry Archives</b>			
<b>From The Blogs</b> (1 Viewing) The happenings from Member Blogs	<b>2 months into transition</b> by [user] 08-17-2010 01:50 PM	1,542	1,542
<b>The Challenge Forum</b> (1 Viewing) Have a hair challenge to post? Post it here!	<b>We Cutting Challenge, Cont'd</b> by [user] Today 09:03 AM	222	15,246
<b>Locs Discussion</b> (30 Viewing) Locs, Dredlocks, Sisterlocks, Braided Locs, Nubian Locs, Freeform Locs. Discuss them all and more here.	<b>Inspirational.</b> by [user] Today 10:21 AM	12,403	178,342
<b>Sub-Forums:</b> <b>Help Me With My Locs!</b> <b>Find a Loc Buddy</b>			
<b>Alopecia &amp; Hair Loss</b> Discussion about Alopecia and other forms of hair loss, their cause and treatment.	<b>Cinnamon and olive oil Works...</b> by [user] Yesterday 12:07 PM	518	4,455
<b>Transitioners Discussion</b> (3 Viewing) For help and support for just for those who are transitioning out of the relaxer.	<b>I don't want to fall again L...</b> by [user] Today 07:03 AM	7,625	77,859
<b>Online Photo Album Links</b> (1 Viewing) Post your online album links for the website here. Also post changes to your existing links.	<b>All Natural Fatti</b> by [user] Yesterday 06:34 PM	5,619	55,861

User Information



User Name

Password

☐ Remember Me?

Latest Threads

**"I told you so..."**  
- by [user]

**He'lla**  
- by [user]

**Happy Pies**  
- by [user]

**So I went to the barber...**  
- by [user]

**Beauwax**  
- by [user]

**Inspirational.**  
- by [user]

**Which is best?**  
- by [user]

**What is your secret nickname for your hair?**  
- by [user]

Welcome to the [user] Natural Haircare Forums.

Welcome to [user]'s Forums. You must be a registered member before you can post messages on the forum: click the register link above to proceed. To start viewing messages, select the forum that you want to visit from the selection below. **Register to see more forums and fewer ads.**

Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts
<b>Hair</b>			
General discussion about your natural hair experiences.			
<b>Introductions</b> (6 Viewing) New members, introduce yourself [user] here. We'd love to hear your story!	Private	3,947	18,116
<b>General Chat</b> (31 Viewing) General chat about the Natural Hair Lifestyle	Private	24,308	466,215
<b>Help Me With My Hair!</b> (17 Viewing) This is the place to ask for advice or questions for specific help with styles, techniques, combating dryness and for those new to natural hair. Also the place to post your own styling successes!	Private	2,071	23,289
<b>Sub-Forums:</b> <b>Style Workshop</b> <b>The Hot Comb &amp; Blue Dry Archives</b>			
<b>From The Blogs</b> (7 Viewing) The happenings from Member Blogs	<b>2 months into transition</b> by [user] 08-17-2010 08:50 PM	1,542	1,542
<b>The Challenge Forum</b> (3 Viewing) Have a hair challenge to post? Post it here!	Private	222	15,247
<b>Locs Discussion</b> (38 Viewing) Locs, Dredlocks, Sisterlocks, Braided Locs, Nubian Locs, Freeform Locs. Discuss them all and more here.	Private	12,403	178,347
<b>Sub-Forums:</b> <b>Help Me With My Locs!</b> <b>Find a Loc Buddy</b>			
<b>Alopecia &amp; Hair Loss</b> (1 viewing) Discussion about Alopecia and other forms of hair loss, their cause and treatment.	Private	518	4,455
<b>Transitioners Discussion</b> (2 Viewing) For help and support for just for those who are transitioning out of the relaxer.	Private	7,625	77,859

Members also see a more extensive “Afro Pics” gallery heading the page, with six mini-tower sized photographs. Refreshing the page generates a new group of six candids. The two log-in boxes on the generic page are transformed as well; both now send “Welcome [screen-name] greetings and offer information on the date and time of your last visit. Image 4.9 shows these enhancements.

**Image 4.9** Additional member views



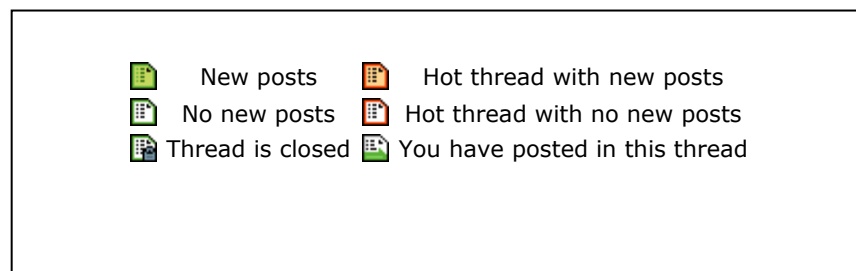
Clicking on the link to a particular forum takes you to that board's main page. The hyperlinked screen-names of all moderators assigned to each forum are listed at the bottom of the board. Moderators' profiles are easily accessed and members can e-mail a request, complaint, suggestion, etc. freely. With the

exception of the site's owner, Teena, who has administrator privileges throughout the site and is listed as the first moderator on all boards, all moderators are anonymous to members. They are referred to as "Moderator \_\_\_\_" with the blank being a capital letter (e.g. Moderator Z) which appears to be randomly assigned.

Threads are ordered by most recent activity and listed immediately after threads rated "Pinned." Pinned threads are accompanied by a blue thumbtack icon and remain stationary, no matter how you sort the thread list (e.g. by date, screen-name, number of posts, etc.). These threads were chosen for permanent display because a moderator deemed them particularly important or informative. Members may post in pinned threads and can also recommend a thread they find especially helpful for potential promotion to pinned status.

Each thread in the main page list has a range of supplemental items. Two small icons precede the thread title; the first icon is determined by Kinks.com to reflect the thread's status (Box 4.2) and the second is selected by an OP to grab attention and/or to transmit information about the thread. The default for the second icon is a sheet of paper, but members may opt to change it to punctuation, a smiley, a bar chart to indicate that the thread contains a poll, etc.

**Box 4.2.** Board legend



Hovering over any thread generates a pop-up window with a preview of the initial post. Image 4.10 contains the first a portion of the thread view on the *Transition* board. It also displays the pop-up for the thread titled “Lookin for a hair stylist.”

**Image 4.10** Forum thread view



Each post in a thread is contained in an individual cell with a range of information about the post and poster and several reply options. Clicking the heart icon in the top right corner adds to a member’s positive reputation; choosing the exclamation point reports a post that runs afoul of board rules. The reputation element, which members can disable if they wish, is new and has been a source of confusion for some Kinks. Teena posted this explanation:

You can't give negative reputation, only positive. I use it to thank people for giving good advice. And I check reputations often. When someone wants to give a free subscription to someone but doesn't know who to give it to, the reputation is one of those things I check to see who deserves a gift. [smile]

The member's self-selected avatar follows, joined by their screen-name, tagline, join date, location, post count, and activity symbol. Photographs are popular avatars, either of the Kink herself or a loved one (e.g. child, spouse, pet), but members also post personal artwork, pictures of celebrities, book jackets, crafts, stills from movies, and other scenes or items that capture their personality or mood. Some Kinks post avatars of their hair icon/idol which is allowable under the board rules; however, no such role model may have straight hair. The small white box beside a screen-name turns green when the member is currently logged in. A member's tagline is an opportunity to further showcase one's personality and the blurbs run the gamut. If a member does not choose her own caption, however, the site defaults to one based on her level of posting activity to date. Some members opt out of displaying their location while others have fun with it. Locations such as "a galaxy far, far away" and "here" were observed during the data collection process. Finally, members may post icons to allow others to link to them on IM (e.g. AIM, Yahoo, MSN Messenger, etc.), Skype, or other social networking systems.



Image 4.11 Post view



## Archives

Clicking the Archives link brings up a hyperlinked tree view of all forums, which suggests that you can click on any forum to view older threads. Upon examination, all links with the exception of that for the *Blogs* forum are dead. However, each board's display options allow you to access threads up to and including the Kinks.com debut date; so, all old threads and posts are immediately archived and available for easy reference.

## Culture

*[Kinks] is like one of those people that is thought provoking and pushes the envelope [sic] so to speak, not because shes [sic] so radical but because she goes against the norm and what has always been done and deemed acceptable by society as a whole. (Hair)*

*Whenever there is a movement, people are going to resist it. And I think [Kinks] is a movement. Some people get us, and some people don't. (Hair)*

The ideal Kink is a Renaissance woman, which in this context refers more to Zora Neale Hurston than Isabella d'Este. The Harlem Renaissance, the period of the early 20th century when black artistry and intellect flourished before a worldwide audience, also describes the cultural movement that occurred when Hurston, Langston Hughes, Alice Dunbar-Nelson and others worked to unpack the realities of American blackness. The Harlem Renaissance was more than music, art, and literature; it was a *rebirth* in the truest sense of the word "renaissance," a rediscovery of themselves and an exploration of racial consciousness after generations of being quite literally bound to a very narrow idea of what it meant to be black in America. Kinks.com attempts to borrow from this legacy, positioning itself as a safe space for black women to examine the myriad ways in which life at the crossroads impacts them.

One point of impact involves the beauty standards scale and where black women as a group fall on it. "There is," Hill (2009) explains, "a strong cultural consensus when it comes to defining female beauty and it is based on white standards of physical attractiveness, for example, straight hair, thin bodies, and white skin" (p. 741). If the consensus is that white equals right with regard to beauty standards or otherwise, Kinks.com did not get the memo. (Or perhaps it is



more accurate to say that it got it but threw it away.) The site is as unapologetically anti-European beauty standards as it is pro-black and pro-black woman.

The overall atmosphere on the site is familial and supportive towards insiders, Kinks appear to genuinely enjoy one another's company and appreciate that this site exists as a resource for them to come together. Kinks.com is definitely not just about hair and members regularly describe themselves as "addicted" or "hooked" on the community. The site has relatively few explicit rules, but they are decidedly set. They are also, at heart, variations on a specific theme: respect for blackness as a whole, not just for natural hair, and compliance to the community mission. Debate and critique of the black community are common and encouraged; however, any poster who wanders into the territory of what the site considers Eurocentricism or denigration of black humanity (e.g. hyping the benefits of straight hair, comparing a black person to a monkey, using blackness or Africa as a slur, etc.) shall not wander for long. Teena's firm reminder appears at the foot of every thread:

We don't allow posting about the benefits of relaxing your hair because at Kinks, there are no benefits. Posts which discuss how to change your hair's texture or straighten it will be deleted.

Personal attacks or posts we see as hateful will get you banned.

Moreover, the site fairly buzzes with intensity of Kinks' defense of their community's mission and identity. Kinks approach this defense in a variety of

ways, as seen in the following three examples which show nonchalant, confrontational, and philosophical appeals to order. In the first case, a veteran Kink consoles a newbie who is upset that her thread about straightened hair was not well-received. She does this by framing backlash against inappropriate topics as a ‘rite of passage’ and nothing to get upset about and encourages the newbie to wear the “L” (loss) as a badge of honor:

Cheer up, getting your thread locked, deleted, or shunned is almost a Kinks rite of passage. Look at it as your conversion from princess to queen-- take the "L" and move on, move on to enjoy another nappy day. :lol:

In the next exchange, a Kink forcefully challenges a Kink who has stated that, while natural hair has its charms, straightened hair offers more styling options. The respondent incorporates a personal attack into her reply, suggesting outright that the original poster is a self-hater:

Don't bring that conformist-mainstream-straight-is-better-believe-what-the-white-man's-society-i'm-still-stuck-in the-matrix-bull\*\*\*\* up in here.

The Kink in the final instance attempts to deter inappropriate behavior by framing the issue as one of fundamental respect of Teena’s philosophy and of Teena herself:

this is a moot point..y'all can do whatever you want to your hair as it's on your head. but the rules of the site are clearly stated, so who

cares how healthy flat flaming hot tool of hair torture,ing or blow drying your hair can be? you can argue the greatness of the heat and hot hair all you want, but this is Teena's site and she's asked that we don't discuss it so why not be respectful? for real some of y'all are like people who come to my house and smoke when i clearly say no smoking and then are shocked that they can't smoke. yes rules apply to you and you are not the exception. if you feel the need to discuss the validities of it then fine, just do it on another site.

Kinks seem to regard themselves as fundamentally different from other black haircare sites and potentially superior to them, due to Kinks.com being more conscious,<sup>39</sup> serious, engaging or informative or possibly some blend of all of these. Administrators do not appear to directly encourage this mindset and indeed actively discourage it at times (e.g. In the Nappenings section of the homepage, Teena makes it clear that those still using relaxers are welcome to join the site). Still, the undercurrent is often there when comparing Kinks.com to what Fab Fro refers to as “those OTHER sites” (*Hair*). Frolicious sums it up:

I'm very grateful for Kinks b/c if I want some GOOD advice about growing my napptural hair, I can feel pretty sure that if I'm about to go off on the deep end & do something harmful to my tresses, my

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<sup>39</sup> As the term is used in the black community, to mean a self-aware pro-black identity

mind, or my body, my fellow Kinks will be there to give me the enlightened TRUTH!

Here, NettieBraid emphasizes Kinks' superiority over similar sites in her attempt to raise skinEminE's spirits after the latter's thread was locked for being pro-straightening:

Chin up skinEminE! You started a topic that resulted in a learning opportunity for a whole lot of us! The quickness as which it was closed it just a testimony to Teena's commitment in ensuring that we focus on the what's healthy, good and right for our mind, body and spirit. Can't get all that anywhere but Kinks.

Kinks.com's assertion that it is a place for black woman who are most marginalized (e.g. Teena's explanation of why the site is limited to kinky, highly-textured hair) extends beyond words to the images that have been chosen to illustrate the community's pages. There are four non-member photographs, non-outside advertisement representations of black women on the site: Nappertiti, the cartoon shopper, the photograph of the braiding session, and the advertising graphic. All four hold clues to the Kinks.com perspective.

First, none of the black women portrayed is fair-skinned; in fact, all have medium to dark brown coloring and easily observable black features. In line with the consensus toward a Eurocentric beauty standard and the resulting colorism among blacks (Hill, 2009), so many of the representations of what is considered beautiful in the black community follow the "closer to white the better" directive.

The fact that 100% of the images chosen by Kinks administrators to represent aspects of the site are at least medium brown and natural haired is no accident. Neither still is the decision to choose representations that portray black women as traditionally feminine, financially solvent, etc. (e.g. Nappertiti's regal pose and the shopper's chic outfit and pleasant expression) which are at odds with common stereotypes of black women.

**Image 4.12** Kinks.com's portrayal of black women



The Grooming photograph in image 4.13 (first seen in Image 4.3) is different in several significant ways, not the least of which being that this image celebrates a black culture that is rooted in the black past. There is no way to know when the picture was taken, or where. Two women sit outside in what could just as easily be Kenya as Kentucky, 1965 as 2005. The braider is perched forward on a straight-backed wooden chair and the braidee sits on a low box, back resting against the hairdresser's knees. The women's clearly Africanized features are far removed from European beauty standards, both are dark-skinned and neither wears straightened hair. The photograph captures a momentary lull in the activity, as the client, kinky hair on the unfinished side

jutting up like a mass of black cotton, checks herself out in a small rectangular mirror. She looks pleased. The braider, heavily pregnant, head festooned with dozens of Bantu knots, does too. Showing nappy hair as normal and nurtured is a revolutionary act, which is of course the point.

**Image 4.13** Grooming page photograph, revisited



Its dedication to deconstructing and dismantling negative attitudes and actions towards blacks, specifically black women, and the way it chooses to do so place Kinks.com firmly outside of the mainstream and draws regular criticism from outsiders, many of them other black women. Rather than a cause of anxiety, however, Kinks seem to regard this as a kind of badge of honor and dismiss the backlash as the ramblings of those still caught in what they have dubbed *The Matrix*, a reference to the 1999 sci-fi movie of the same name. In the movie a man “learns from mysterious rebels about the true nature of his reality and his role in the war against the controllers of it” (imdb.com).

As this chapter reveals, the structure and culture of Kinks.com is a complex mix of openness and control, created in a purported attempt to create a community that honors black womanhood. While it is unarguably a community,

can it rightly be called a *learning* community? If so, what kind? Finally, does the site's status as a place by and for a certain type of black women have any impact on what learning, if any, occurs there? Chapter 5 and 6 offer an in-depth exploration of those questions.

## CHAPTER 5 VOICES FROM THE GAPS I<sup>40</sup>

### Introduction

In the physical world of the classroom, Learning Communities (LC) privilege interaction, collaboration, and communication over traditional learning methods in the pursuit of knowledge integration. Online Learning Communities (OLC) transfer this process to the Internet, an environment that allows people to connect across time, space, and place in order to work toward a common learning goal. While it is often the case, Learning Communities are not limited to the classroom (whether physical or virtual) nor are they constrained by formal education itself. Instead, Learning Communities can occur anywhere that groups of people do. As outlined in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether Kinks.com is a learning community as defined in the research and to explore how black women's informal communication styles may influence their learning experiences.

This chapter contains an analysis of the qualitative data collected during the study. Data was collected between January 2010 and May 2010. Collection focused on eight boards on Kinks.com, an online community for black women who have chosen to wear their hair in its natural state. All posts in threads that had a start date between June 30, 2008 and October 31, 2008 on the *Crafts*, *Culture*, *Hair*, *Heat*, *Locs*, *Styles*, *Tech Support*, and *Transition* boards were

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<sup>40</sup> This chapter's title was taken from the University of Minnesota's English Department project/website which serves as a repository for information on the artistic contributions of women of color. Its goal is to "[reach] backwards and forward to place readers, thinkers, students and educators on a bridge which connects the gaps that exist in literature, society, and culture."



selected in the first round. Threads on a board were placed in alphabetical order by thread title<sup>41</sup> and posts within them were numbered 1-n. A random number generator was used to select a 10% sample, rounding up to the next highest whole number. This method was repeated for each board until it produced a data set comprised of 1,593 posts. Table 5.1 shows the breakdown of posts by number and percentage by each board.

**Table 5.1** Overview of data set sources

Board	# of Posts 6/30/08-10/31/08	# of Posts in Data Set	% of Total Posts in Data Set <sup>42</sup>
Heat	63	7	0.4%
Styles	386	39	2.4%
Tech Support	206	21	1.3%
Locs	6,273	628	39.4%
Crafts	478	48	3.0%
Transition	3,270	327	20.5%
Culture	763	77	4.8%
Hair	4,451	446	28.0%
Total	15,890	1,593	99.8%

Kinks.com is an active community. In eight years, it has grown to 118,000 members contributing 2.2 million posts in 125,000 threads on 48 boards (34 main, 14 sub). The number of posts collected in the preliminary round reflects this: there were 15,890 posts in threads started in a 124-day period on 1/6 of the total available discussion boards. There was only one board, *Heat*, which did not

<sup>41</sup> Microsoft Word automatically alphabetized thread titles during the “save” procedure; so they were transferred into Nvivo in this format.

<sup>42</sup> All percentages are rounded.

manage to break the 100-post ceiling. Its 63-post contribution was likely tempered by the fact that the Heat board serves as an archive where only administrators may add new threads.<sup>43</sup> *Tech Support* and *Styles* contributed 206 and 386 posts respectively, followed by *Crafts* with 478 posts and *Culture* with 763. With 3,270 posts, the *Transition* board had the lowest count of the three largest contributors. *Hair*, at 4,451 posts, and *Locs* with 6,273 rounded out the initial board count.

Five boards contributed less than 5% of the total posts in the data set: The *Heat* board's 7 posts comprised 0.4%, followed by 1.3% (21 posts) from the *Tech Support* board, 2.4% (39 posts) from *Styles*, 3.0% (48 posts) from *Crafts*, and 4.8% (77 posts) from *Culture*. The three largest contributors were the *Transition*, *Hair* and *Locs* boards. The 327 posts on the *Transition* board made up nearly 21% (20.5%) of the total count, while *Hair* took more than ¼ of the total, at 446 posts. The final board, *Locs*, contributed nearly 40% of the set, with 628 posts.

The five boards that feature discussion on growing, styling or otherwise working with kinky hair (i.e. Heat, Styles, Locs, Transition, and Hair) comprised 91% of data set. The three boards that map the path from relaxed to nappy, which comes only in either the loose or loc'd variety (i.e. Transition, Hair, and Locs) made up 88%. Kinks.com was founded as and is fundamentally still a haircare community, so it is fitting that the bulk of posting activity came from boards dedicated to the maintenance of natural hair.

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<sup>43</sup> In point of fact, the threads are not "new" at all, they are entries about bad heat-related experiences that are moved from other boards and posted in the Heat archive as a warning.

## **Research Questions**

The study's design, data collection, and analysis were guided by the four research questions that were posed in Chapter 1 and methods described in Chapter 3. Research question 1 was addressed in Chapter 2. This chapter explores the second research question; and the third and fourth questions will be covered in Chapter 6.

### **Research Question II: In what ways is Kinks.com an online learning community?**

*Q: Since Joining Kinks....., What have you learned?*

*A: shoot what HAVENT i learned... (Locs)*

In order to determine what, if any, similarity Kinks.com has to the characteristics of learner-to-learner knowledge interaction, collaboration, discussion, control, and learning patterns found in other online learning communities, the data was analyzed for evidence of the level of 1) control and 2) online learning collaboration on the website. Table 5.2 has the breakdown of the data:

**Table 5.2** Overview of Control and Online learning collaboration data

Code	# of References
<b>Control</b>	
	<i>Control- Restrict. Freedom</i>
Board filters	102
Group norms	125
Moderator control	3
<b>Total Control-Restricting freedom</b>	<b>230</b>
	<i>Control- Allowing freedom</i>
Autonomy and self-expression	0
Sharing outside sources	48
<b>Total Control-Allowing freedom</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Online learning collaboration</b>	
	<i>Online learning- TAT</i>
Questions	315
Reflection	141
Scaffolding & engaging	3308
Statements	2912
<b>Total Online learning collaboration-TAT</b>	<b>6676</b>
	<i>Online learning- General</i>
Assessing learning	85
Sharing solutions	230
<b>Total Online learning collaboration-General</b>	<b>315</b>

## Control

The level of control on Kinks.com was measured using five codes: board filters, group norms, moderator control, autonomy and self-expression, and sharing outside sources. Board filters, group norms, and moderator control were grouped as *restricting freedom*, as behavior that falls into this category actively limited what Kinks could do. By contrast, autonomy and self expression and sharing outside sources were thought of as *allowing freedom* because high levels in this category would suggest fewer restrictions.

### *Restricting freedom*

There were 230 references to restrictive behaviors on Kinks.com. 35 of these instances were attributed to the direct use of board filtering technology to edit members' posts. As Teena emphasizes on the homepage, Kinks.com maintains a hard-line no-straightening platform and discussion of the benefits of thermal or chemical straightening or attempts to persuade others to straighten their hair is banned. Posts<sup>44</sup> that used words like "relaxer," "flatiron," or "press" in context (e.g. recalling how one used to style their hair before going natural, references to a magazine article on black women's grooming habits, etc.) were allowed but the site used filters to automatically change words to reflect its stance. Perm and relaxer were transformed into "chemical fire cream," flatiron and blow dryer became "burning hot tool of hair torture," press morphed into "burn the hair straight," etc. There were variations on what the filter substituted,

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<sup>44</sup> The filters affect the body of posts, not the titles.

but the general guide was that chemical treatments were modified to *fire cream* and heat tools became a combination of *burn*, *torture*, *flaming hot*, etc., as illustrated in these three examples:

Here, a Kink who maintains that black women who perm their hair are often defensive when interacting with those who do not had her mention of a chemical process filtered:

That was funny. I would have probably given her the raised eye and laughed. But it does sound like she went on the defensive...like so many do. They ask about your hair and start ranting about why they get a **chemical fire cream**.

The filter modified a reference to heat-styling in a Kink's vent about others' attitudes towards her natural hair in this excerpt. Note that its author touches upon the assumption that natural haired black women are also more earthy and conscious across the board (i.e., wearing organic clothes), as mentioned in Chapter 2:

Girl I completely understand what you are saying! Ok! Most of my friends cannot understand what must be wrong with me for wanting to be natural! One asked me "are you going to start wearing organic clothes and stuff next?" I mean they have no room for comprehending that I am just tired of being trapped by **having my hair burnt straight with heat** and not being able to do the things I like. Plus I am tired of being someone else's image of beauty.

The third example was in response to an assertion that increased numbers of black women wearing their hair naturally was having a negative economic impact on beauty supply stores in urban areas. In it, the name of a heat tool was changed into one of the variants of flaming + torture that the filter reserves for such appliances:

In both places [DC and Cleveland], there's no shortage of supersized Korean owned beauty supply stores full of every type of CFC, weave, wig, **flaming tool of torture**, and bad customer service (from my experience)...

Filters were most often used to express the community's distaste for straightening, but not always. They were also used against profanity, inserting asterisks at strategic positions in offensive words (e.g. bullshit becomes bull\*\*\*\*). This excerpt shows another way in which they were employed, to correct what could be seen as derogatory language towards another group:

[Re: another Kink's confusion over what "yt" stood for in the thread starter post] this reminds me about how my post on men's tighty whitis (which i typed as y...t..) got filtered as "tighty a white person" [laugh] and when i think y..t.. i just picture george jefferson saying it [laugh] anyway yeah i can see that hair to black women = weight to white women

In this case, a Kink used shorthand slang for "white person" in reference to slang for a style of men's underwear and was dinged by the filters. Her amused

response was rare, which should not suggest that Kinks are usually upset by the filters. Instead, ignoring them seemed to be the most common reaction. Indeed in the 35 instances of filtering that occurred, this member was the sole Kink to show any “verbal” reaction at all. There is no way to know if this lack of response is due to a general consensus on the filters’ use or if most members have simply become inured to them.

The filters did not catch every reference to chemical treatments or heated hair appliances. There was no indication as to whether this was an intentional move, a flaw in the system, or the result of the filters being turned off at certain times. Sometimes, the filter caught every instance in a post while other times it moved through like a tornado—taking out one house but leaving a nearby neighbor’s home untouched. For example, the word “perms” was left unfiltered in this post while the names of heated styling tools were altered to “flaming hot tools of hair torture” in the same sentence:

My mom has had **perms and flaming hot tools of hair torture**  
since she was 16 years old,and now,after 45 years,she wants to  
lock her hair.

Here, the term “blow dryer” which is regularly filtered as “flaming hot tool of hair torture”, isn’t; however, the next heated tool mentioned in the same sentence, is:

Unless you go to a stylist who is comfortable or used to working  
with natural hair, the stylist will probably use a **blow dryer or flat**



**flaming hot tool of hair torture** on your hair and you really don't want to risk the heat damage.

There were times filters blocked a word in one post and allowed it to stand unaltered in another, as in these examples of Kinks using the “yt” shorthand to refer to white people and not men’s briefs:

- I do remember working at a summer camp a few years ago b4 I went natural, I was roudning up all the kids to leave the theme park. One of the **little ghetto yt girls** was like, "You're ugly." I was like [rolleyes] "little girl get your pale fat @ss on the bus." [laugh]
- [laugh] @ you guys seeing **all these middle-aged yt people** at these concerts, I'd be like [unsure][laugh][huh?]

Of the remaining board filter references, 67 were instances of circumventing the filters. As stated earlier, Kinks’ overwhelming response to words that show up as filtered was to ignore them; however, this is only part of the story. Although they did not explicitly say anything about the filters, many members employed tricks of punctuation (e.g. adding slashes, periods in the middle of the word, etc.) to thwart the changes:

- i believe that you should school your **p.erned** friends on the harm of using the chemicals.
- hence, if majority black men see majority black women praising **s.traight, p.erned** hair as if it is the only way, that is what those black men will get accustomed to.

- i'm sure we all remember some of the nappatural hair icons in black pop culture - lauryn hill, angie stone, erykah badu, jill scott, etc. however, recently we have seen some of these icons sport **straight r/elaxed** 'dos.....making it seems as if nappatural hair is a fad that came...and went.

Another way of acknowledging the filter even as one evaded it was most notably seen in the case of referring to a “chemical fire cream” as a “CFC.” The filter’s term has been incorporated into Kinks.com culture and members often opted to use it rather than its mainstream counterparts (i.e., relaxer or perm). Significantly, those that used the term made no attempt to explain what the acronym stood for, clearly assuming that their audience would already know. This can be seen here, in a Kink’s comment considering covering up her hair because her natural hair draws so much more attention than her straightened tresses:

I got plenty of attention **back in the days of the CFC**, but these days, I am seriously thinking about wrapping my hair when I go out.  
(Yeah, it's like that. [laugh])

A Kink’s epiphany upon seeing her natural hair for the first time after many years of chemically straightening it also illustrates the practice:

But after **25+ years of cfcs**, I had no idea that my hair was curly.  
All I knew was nappy because that is what was preached to me my entire life.

As does this veteran's attempt to raise a discouraged newbie's morale:

you have to get used to the new, **cfc-free look!!!!** post a pic so the  
vets can give you advice

Kinks.com uses moderators, all volunteers, who were awarded moderator status due to a positive history and presence in the board(s) to which they were assigned. Moderators worked in shifts to keep the forum operational and in line with the site's mission and had the ability to edit or delete any post. They posted as their alter-ego (e.g. Moderator W, Moderator Z, etc.) to remind members of site rules, bring a derailed thread (i.e. one that has gone far off topic) back on track, announce that a thread was being locked, etc. The data revealed three instances of direct moderator intervention, all of which are included here. In the first example, the moderator attempts to rein in an argument (emphasis in original):

Y'all can have this debate, but **TONE DOWN THE ARGUMENTS**,  
or it will be closed, and offending members will lose their posting  
privileges. (Moderator W)

A moderator cautions members not to post questions about commercial products on other boards in an attempt to circumvent the 100+ post minimum threshold on the Commercial Products board in this entry (emphasis in original):

Ok, time to make this message again, because some folks are  
**JUST NOT GETTING IT!** Please DO NOT post topics about  
commercial hair products in the Hair forum or **ANY OTHER**

FORUM simply because you do not have access to the Commercial Products forum. These threads will more than likely either be deleted or closed. Thanks. (Moderator Y)

In the last case, a member titles her thread, “I Owe The Ladies Here An Apology, MODS: off topic pass granted by Mod W”, in a pre-emptive strike against any other moderator who would reprimand her for straying from the board’s theme. The title reflects a recent direct intervention on the part of Moderator W.

This last intervention, which involved board sanctions for veering off-topic, leads us to the next measure of restrictive control on Kinks.com: group norms. More than half of the references to *restricting freedom* were attributed to the use of group norms to shape Kink behavior. In Chapter 4, we saw how Kinks openly assert their vision for their community. Among other things, Teena fills Nappenings, her homepage space, with the site’s pro-kinky, anti-straightening policy; the terms and conditions statement at the end of the registration process reiterates it; and a summary of the rules is positioned below the “post reply” box on every thread. We have also learned that moderators have broad enforcement powers; however the data showed that members eagerly shared the responsibility of enforcing rules and protecting the site’s mission. The following exchange is one of the best illustrations of how norming was done on Kinks.com and how personally its members took their charge:

^You are new here. But I *KNOW* you didn't say straight hair has more styling options than natural hair[unsure] Are you joking?

Seriously? \*must fight not to get sarcastic,condescending etc\*

Okay. You need to visit some fotkis. Don't bring that conformist-mainstream-straight-is-better-believe-what-the-white-man's-society-i'm-still stuck-in the-matrix-bull\*\*\*\* up in here. How many ways can you style straight hair????? Look at the Asians and whites, what do they do to their hair? Ponytail and straight down. chemical fire cream-ponytail,wrap, straight down. Impressive. Now spend some more time on the site looking at the *hundreds* of styles locked and unlocked natural hair can achieve before you start speaking the same nonsense we are trying to avoid here.

Much like the member in the above example, Kinks often reiterated the site's mission for those who were thought to run afoul of it. Here, a veteran warns that a new thread would likely be closed due to inappropriate material and offers a link to an earlier thread that had met a similar fate:

This thread will most likely be shut down, b/c Kinks does not advocate this. You might want to check out this link until then: [link to earlier Kinks thread]

A Kink frames a similar warning as a lesson, spelling out why Teena and the site have come out against hair-straightening:

Heat makes the hair straight, and that's considered to be more "acceptable" out there than not doing anything to make it straight. Teena is challenging this through this site.

Even when they fundamentally disagreed with the site's stance on a particular issue, Kinks did not hesitate to defend the site:

I agree that just because one straightens their hair, doesn't mean they have some hatred towards their hair. Many times, its simply just a style, but the site doesn't allow for topics like these and doesn't advocate any types of straightening.

To tell those who might bristle at the need to do so to find another board:

this is a moot point..y'all can do whatever you want to your hair as it's on your head. but the rules of the site are clearly stated, so who cares how healthy flat flaming hot tool of hair torture,ing or blow drying your hair can be? you can argue the greatness of the heat and hot hair all you want, but this is Teena's site and she's asked that we don't discuss it so why not be respectful? for real some of y'all are like people who come to my house and smoke when i clearly say no smoking and then are shocked that they can't smoke. yes rules apply to you and you are not the exception. **if you feel the need to discuss the validities of it then fine, just do it on another site**

Or to instruct a websearch:

It's a verboten topic here on Kinks, you best google it to (or maybe check out other hair forums) for more info.

As with the steadfast adherence to the site's mission, the idea of a Kinks identity is also quite strong. Members often stressed the importance of their identity by emphasizing the differences between them and others. One way they accomplished this was to pathologize chemical straightening, couching references to it in terms that are usually used to describe drug addiction and illness. Kinks spoke of those who relax as “permies” who are hooked on “creamy crack” and referred to going back to straightening after being natural as a “relapse” or “falling off the wagon.” The following examples highlight the relaxer-as-drug addiction meme; in the first, a Kink reframes her “relapse” as a teachable moment for herself and for others:

**I relapsed** after I cut my newly natural hair into a shorter style. Never again! Today, I have little regrets because it really showed me the true difference. Not only did it save me from being a guinea pig later, but it let me be a witness to others that there's nothing close to Natural.

A former relaxer shares her frustration with people in her life who do not support her choice to beat her “crack” addiction here:

I tried to show her the thinning areas that have occurred **due to the creamy crack** but she wasn' t trying to hear it. My sister and my aunts are the same way. It seems people who support me the most are a few coworkers and friends( and some of them are white). **I'm not going back to the crack.**

The idea of a specific Kink mindset of cultural critique through hair played into a distinctive Kink identity. Kinks perceive themselves as being held to a higher standard. This is evident as a member takes on the role of wise counsel to a newcomer, drawing on her own experiences as a newbie to assert the site's unique status and value:

One thing I learned is that **this site is very deep. Its more than just not using chemicals.** The whole mindset of having natural hair and being proud of it and not feeling like in order to look "cute" or feel "sexy" your hair has to be long, straight, and free flowing like you see on tv and in all the videos. You'll see a lot of people against straight weave on here for those reasons. **You'll find on the other hair sites that none of this matters to them. At first I was like "who cares?" but I have a better understanding of it now...** At the end of the day, its your hair so you can choose to do whatever you want without feeling bad about it, **its just there are some things that you are not going to get kudos on from the women on this particular site because its all about texture on here.**

Another poster says much the same thing in a different exchange, framing Kink identity as a process of enlightenment:

In the beginning, I was like, what is the big deal. But after being a continued member and subscribing, **I really learned that one of the goals of kinks.com is to embrace [KinkThink].** Trying to



manipulate [your hair] in 50 million ways to create something that isn't there is anti-KinkThink.

KinkThink identity draws a clear line between being natural and having natural hair:

**and the chick that says that she's got natural hair may in fact not have a re.laxer...but, she's sure not "KinkThink"...** I say let folks do what they do... [smile]

To Kinks, it is the “real deal”:

“ETA<sup>45</sup>: If i were you i wouldn't get mad at the Good Hair Comments Because believe it or not they are actually trying to pay you a compliment.....**we just Know the real deal [wink]**”

Challenges to board convention, rare and always unsuccessful, most often came in the form of passive thread titles in the vein of “I Hope I Don't Get In Trouble For This One..., I just have to ask...” or “So I Know We're All Pro Nappy But..., what do you guys think about....” Rarely did a member take a more direct approach, as did this member who boldly states that she sees nothing wrong with straightening:

I admit, very rarely, but i do flat flaming hot tool of hair torture my hair just because i want a temporary change and i never had any damage. As long as you take care of it, i don't see the problem, that's with anything. But that's my opinion.

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<sup>45</sup> Edited to add = ETA, used when a poster edits their own post

Similarly, in the following entry, a member who likes to heat style her hair pushes back at being publicly reprimanded for breaking the rules. The enforcer asserts that speaking about heat on the site when it is expressly forbidden is disrespectful and caps her reply with a smiley with its hands thrown up in confusion. The heat fan turns the monitor's words against her, substituting a smiley with an exasperated expression for emphasis:

**Kink 1:** [You can talk about anything] Except for the stuff that Teena has asked not to be discussed...and you are asking the question on this site, where Teena has asked that we don't discuss how awesome heat styling your nappy hair can be...I mean c'mon [unsure]

**Kink 2:** I didn't start a topic about how awesome heat styling can be. I just asked a question. I mean c'mon [rolleyes].

Breaks like these never went unnoticed or unchallenged by other Kinks and moderators locked all offending threads. Moderators did not appear to routinely delete these threads after locking them although some were moved to the Heat archive, which administrators acknowledge is there to serve as a warning to others who may choose that path. Perhaps the same logic is behind leaving locked, contentious threads on other boards to be read by future Kinks.

Kinks know that breaking the rules can result in banning. However, it would be extremely difficult to discern whether a member had been bounced from the community after challenges of the "I straighten my hair and don't see

anything wrong with it” variety. Bannings are not publicly announced and unless another Kink had a personal connection to the banned member (e.g. on friends or contact list, outside contact, etc.), with a quarter of a million members coming and going at any time, there would be little chance of noticing that the ex-member was 1) gone and 2) gone due to banning. Also, the ex-member’s IP address is blocked as part of the banning process, so she would have to use another computer and have an approved registration to return to the board. She would then appear as a “newbie” and there would be no outward reason to suspect that she was an erstwhile Kink who had been expelled.

#### *Allowing freedom*

Cases of *autonomy and self-expression* and *sharing outside sources*, the codes used to measure the extent to which Kinks were allowed to break free of control on the site, made up 48 references. All 48 instances were of sharing outside sources. Working within the boundaries of board rules (e.g. no straightening, no porn, no racism, etc.), Kinks’ ability to share resources from other entities on the internet appeared to be unrestricted. Kinks passed along links to news stories, like one that linked to a video of CNN reporter Soledad O’Brien asserting that she self-identifies as black<sup>46</sup>:

[**CNN link**] Soledad O’Brien explaining to a white reporter that she is black.

And another poster’s link to a documentary about Korean dominance in the black

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<sup>46</sup> In consideration of space, actual URLs have been removed from these examples.

haircare market:

There's several parts to this documentary, I could only find one today. I'm sure there are links to it elsewhere on the site [**Youtube link**]

Kinks shared video tutorials, like this Youtube demonstration of the process of combining dreadlocks to reinforce their strength:

Hello Family! I made a video on combining interlocs, nappylocs, sisterlocs. [**Youtube link**]

Or a video that a Kink successfully used to learn a crafting technique:

oh, also, i dont use the lil wire hook that it comes with. i often curve my beading wire into a similar curve as the "rod" "hook" thingy and the beads still slip on smoothly and quickly. how i learned: [**Youtube link**]

Commenters shared online photo albums, with Fotki being most popular site. Fotkis are used to document hairstyles, haircare regimens, product recommendations, etc. Many, like the Kink in this example, posted on Kinks.com to personally invite fellow members to visit their Fotki:

Finally finished creating my fotki album. Hope you guys stop by and show some love. [**Fotki link**]

And others provided links others' albums that contain pictures or information that may be useful in another Kink's situation:

just spritz-pop-and lock then tighten. welcome to locdom! here's a link that may help. [**Fotki link**]

Finally, Kinks also shared direct links to various natural haircare products and accessories for sale, as was done here:

Here's the Link to the Product: [**Homepage of haircare product**]

And here:

Check out his web site [**link to homepage for a headwrap for locs**]! The drawbacks for some is the elastic band can be too tight for some but I found over time that will diminish and the price is 24.95 which may be steep for someone on a budget. However, I can't put a price on good hair accessories or products that make my locks look their absolute best! [big grin] [big grin]

### **Analysis: Control**

Kinks.com is a tightly-controlled environment and no references were coded in the autonomy and self-expression category. In this context, autonomy and self-expression refer to the extent to which non-conformist perspectives are permitted. Conformity plays an integral role on Kinks.com; rules are strict and non-negotiable.

With 230 cases of restrictive activity and 48 of freedom-allowing activity, Kinks were approximately five times more likely to experience interaction that restricted freedom than that which allowed it. Further, as the 48 allowing freedom instances were all of sharing sources, an activity that is itself bound tightly to

board rules (e.g. no pictures of straight-haired women, no links to articles that condone or encourage relaxing, etc.), an argument could be made that 100% references to the level of control on Kinks.com were of the restrictive type.

Challenges to the group's guiding principles were shut down quickly and unflinching. Interestingly, it was not the moderators who were the most active enforcers of the site's mission and identity; Kinks have internalized the message and diligently worked to maintain compliance. Direct moderator involvement into a post happened only 3 times<sup>47</sup> in the 1,593 posts of the data set, comprising just 1% of the instances of restricted control. 44% of the time, the automatic board filters intervened.

The remaining 55% of restrictive interactions occurred when Kinks themselves took on the policing duties, either policing themselves, as members who prefaced their comments with “\*hopes not to get thrown under the bus\*” and “... because of the \*looks around\* blow dryer” or as those like this Kink who quickly retracted a link she posted to pictures of a black celebrity who is known for her straight weaves with: “ETA: took the links out cuz I think its against kinks rules...ooooopps! [smile]”

Or policing each another, like the initial action that motivated an offended poster to write this:

As for saying what you feel and getting banned [huh], not sure if that was aimed at my post but I'll address it anyway. This post was

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<sup>47</sup> If a moderator edits a member's post due to rules violations, they leave a note that indicates 1) that the post has been altered and 2) why.

a simple post about a HEAD WRAP on the no need to get ya self  
all a flutter. [wink]

Given this, Kinks.com is also a community with extremely strong group norms. A Kink who breached the boundaries of the community's mission or identity was 42x more likely to experience correction from a peer than from a moderator, a person who has been officially charged with taking this type of disciplinary action. She was 1.2 times more likely to experience a reprimand from a peer than from computer software programmed to perform that function.

### **Online learning collaboration**

There were 6,991 total references to online learning collaboration in the data, divided into two groups: *Online learning collaboration-TAT* and *Online learning collaboration-General*.

#### *Online learning collaboration-TAT*

The 6,676 TAT cases were made up of questions, statements, scaffolding and engaging behaviors and reflections. Table 5.3 shows TAT references, in detail.

**Table 5.3** TAT references, detail

Code	# of References	% of Total	% of Total TAT References
<i>Questions</i>			
Horizontal	139	44%	2.1%
Vertical	176	56%	2.6%
<b>Questions Total</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>4.7%</b>
<i>Statements</i>			
Non-referential	2142	74%	32.1%
Referential	770	26%	11.5%
<b>Statements Total</b>	<b>2912</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>43.6%</b>
<b>Scaffolding and engaging</b>	<b>3308</b>	--	<b>49.6%</b>
<b>Reflection</b>	<b>141</b>	--	<b>2.1%</b>
Total TAT	<b>6676</b>	--	100.0%
<b>Questions</b>			

Kinks asked a total of 315 questions, 4.7% of their total TAT-coded online learning collaborative behavior. With regard to the total number of TAT learning references, Kinks were as likely to ask a vertical question as a horizontal one.

139 or 44% of the questions Kinks asked each other were horizontal, in which the primary intent was to spur collaboration and interaction. The bolded segment of the example below highlights the four horizontal questions the OP included in her post on Black women and sexual harassment on the street: 1) What are some of your experiences?; 2) What do you do when/if this happens to



you?; 3) Why do you think these men behave this way?; and 4) Do you fear for your safety in these situations or are you more annoyed than anything else? All four questions are designed specifically to spark discussion with other Kinks and have no right or wrong answer:

i came across this mini-documentary (about 8 minutes long) concerning the cat-calling, scrutiny, and general harassment that black women go through on a daily basis just walking along the street minding their own business. i think that most of us have experienced this at some point in our lives and can relate to the women in the video. **what are some of your experiences? what do you do when/if this happens to you? why do you think these men behave this way? do you fear for your safety in these situations or are you more annoyed than anything else?**

The remaining 56% (176 instances) of Kinks' questions were vertical, with data acquisition as a goal. The following examples show this type of question, where the asker assumed that a single correct response existed. Posts often contained several vertical questions at a time and were most often directed to the individual who was thought to hold the answer(s). In the first case, MountainDo asks Black\_n\_Proud specific questions about her loc extensions. All of MountainDo's questions to Black\_n\_Proud in this example are vertical questions:

"[Black\_n\_Proud] Just curious, how long did the loc extensions take to put in? What kind of hair are they made from? How long was

your own hair under there? Did you have the extensions attached to your own twists or was some other method used?"

FiveOh asks several vertical questions about CurlyGurly's hair maintenance routine. Questions about how a product is used, what a product is, where one can obtain a product, etc. were intended to garner specific information from a specific knowledge source:

[CurlyGurly] Diluted baking soda?! **Why? does it get your hair super clean? do you ever just rinse your hair? and also do you ever condition it?** ive started no pooing more frequently because it cuts down on - like you said - putting products like grease and all that other stuff in my hair. I'm trying to condition it when i wash it so that it wont be super dry and in need of moisture. **btw what is lavender water?is that a home made con coction? where can i get some of that? and what is the benefit of letting it drip dry?**

#### Statements

43.6% of the total TAT learning behavior was making statements, which Kinks did 2,912 times. Statements were either non-referential or referential. Non-referential statements provided information or corrected an error. Kinks made 2,142 of this type of statement, comprising 74% of all statement behavior and nearly 1/3 (32.1%) of all TAT collaboration. Some examples of non-referential statements follow. Note that they are matter-of-fact and not primarily concerned with drawing another person into conversation:

**Example 1:** [Describing her daily hair regimen] My routine is pretty simple.

**Example 2:** [Stating which steps remain in her craft project] i still have to sand and glaze them.

Referential statements made direct or indirect reference to other comments. There were 770 of these statements on Kinks.com, 26% of all statements and 11.5% overall. Unlike non-referential statements, referential ones were designed to keep the flow of communication going or to draw another member into a conversation. This included indirectly or directly quoting another Kink, answering a direct question and similar behaviors:

Examples: Quoting another members

- But honestly, **just like MochaChocaLatta said**, if you hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have known that isn't how it's supposed to look.
- **In the words of a great Kink member:** 'Wee's free now.'"
- **I tell you this: as Baduism put it** 'DIY until you can't DIY no more.'"
- These folks don't care about what you have gone through, is going through or what you will have to endure: **EssenceCoverModel was right on par when she said** they just want you to STFU!!

Examples: Answering a direct question

- *[Questions asked by Kink 1 re: Kink 2's experience with negative comments about her headwrap from another black woman: Wha!!!! Good for you? Were you still transitioning? Also, not like it matters, but did she have a perm?]* **Kink 2: I was fully natural, but had worn wraps for some time and had just found Kinks. She had natural hair.**
- *[Questions asked by Kink A re: Kink B's natural textured weave: I'm assuming it's sewn in? How much hair did you use and how long does this last? How do you style it/wash it? Seems like the perfect match for what little hair I have left.]* **Kink B: (Boy I'm late!<sup>48</sup>) It's sewn in, and just 1 pack was used (my own hair was left out in the bang area). Six weeks is the limit -- the tanglies can get out of control, plus the "seams" start to show as your own hair grows. I use the amazing Redken's Curl Booster (green bottle) to refresh the curls every 2-3 days, refreshing in-between by fluffing my hair with damp hands. I have \*not\* figured out how to properly wash it. Right now I'm trying out one of those "dry" shampoos that can be squirted along the tracks and wiped out...**

### Scaffolding and engaging

Scaffolding and engaging behavior was used to personalize the learning community. Half (49.6%) of all collaborative learning captured in the TAT

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<sup>48</sup> Kink B responded several weeks after Kink A posed her questions.

categories consisted of Kinks attempts to warm their environment. These examples illustrate some of the ways that Kinks used scaffolding and engaging behavior. In 3,308 instances, in addition to greeting, congratulating, thanking and other behaviors, they used it to: Praise:

PuffnStuff76 that pendant is AMAZING!!!

Comfort:

I'm sorry you had that experience.

Encourage participation:

Hopefully, someone says something about it on here:-D

Commiserate:

Don't let his comments get to you sis, there's always someone with something negative to say...

Brag:

It looks good too ya'll.

Vent:

It makes me feel like I did when I was a loose nappy and I only got compliments when I straightened my hair or wore a wig [side-eye]

Bond:

[In a thread titled "You know you've been influenced by hair boards when..."] How about when you start making deals with yourself like, "Trndsetta, if you finish this one section of your paper, you can go on Kinks for 30 minutes [tongue]!!

Chastise:

Realize that you are speaking from a place of hurt (which is understandable, please note that this experience isn't unique to you), understand that YOUR sweeping generalization was just as bad as the poking fun, dig through the forums to find threads that will help you make peace with the past and MOVE FORWARD.

Clarify:

Oh girl, don't mind me...you didn't offend me.

And warn:

ummm...I would NEVER trust anything that a recruiter told me unless I saw it in writing.

Reflection

The data revealed 141 references to reflection, sentences that revealed insight into a Kink's innermost thoughts and experiences. These sentences made up 2.1% of all Kink TAT-coded learning behavior. A member shared these reflections under the presumption that other Kinks would offer empathy or an attentive ear (or shoulder) such as in the following posts where a Kink recalls a time in her difficult time in her life when she decided to cut the dreadlocks she had been growing for many years:

I knew what I was doing, but did have some mental health issues at the time that was affecting a lot around me.

And this statement made by a Kink who grieved the recent loss of her mother:

I feel like a piece of me is missing.

A Kink shares her experiences during the Civil Rights Movement and school desegregation:

My freshman year in college, there was a big protest in Boston that most of the black college students in the north east went to. It was to protest the segregated school system in Boston...it was spring of 1975 for goodness sake! We were spit on, called names, rocks thrown at us, arrested. This is MY lifetime. I get followed when I walk into stores, there are places where i'm still not welcomed. It's 2008. This is my life.

And another reveals how she made it through the transition process with little support:

I never felt like giving in but I definitely had to reach down deep sometimes to get through those rough days.

To further determine which characteristics Kinks.com has in common with online learning communities, the TAT-coded data was compared to that in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005), two studies of peer-to-peer online collaborative interaction in postsecondary learning environments. The first Fahy study focuses on three distance education courses, two graduate-level and one for non-degree seeking students. A 13-week graduate-level distance education course was the focus of the second study. Table 5.4 highlights the comparison between the three studies.

**Table 5.4** Comparison of Kinks.com TAT data to Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005)

Code	% of Total TAT Sentences Kinks.com	% of Total TAT Sentences Fahy (2003)	% of Total TAT Sentences Fahy (2005)
<i># of Posts</i>	1593	841	462
<i>Questions</i>			
Horizontal	2.1%	3.1%	1.9%
Vertical	2.6%	1.0%	3.0%
<i>Statements</i>			
Non-referential	32.1%	7.6%	49.3%
Referential	11.5%	54.6%	10.2%
<i>Other</i>			
Reflection	2.1%	11.3%	18.3%
S&E	49.6%	15.2%	11.2%

Kinks' questioning behavior was in line with both Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005) and almost identical to that in the 2005 study: horizontal questioning (2.1% Kinks; 1.9% Fahy, 2005) and vertical questioning (2.6% Kinks; 3.0% Fahy, 2005).

Statement making varied between the three studies, however it is noted that this behavior varied significantly between the two Fahy studies themselves, with Fahy (2003) being essentially the inverse of Fahy (2005): non-referential (2003, 7.6%; 2005, 49.3%) and referential (2003, 54.6%; 2005, 10.2%). Again, of the two studies, Kinks percentages were most similar to that of Fahy (2005). Kinks non-referential statement making was 1/3 of their collaborative behavior; these statements comprised ½ of the behavior in Fahy (2005). Referential



statements were more similar, making up 1/8 of Kinks learning interaction and 1/10 of Fahy (2005).

The widest divergence between the three studies occurs in the reflection and scaffolding and engaging behavior categories. These behaviors were comparable in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005): 11.3% reflection, 15.2% S&E for the 2003 study and 18.3% reflection and 11.2% S&E for the 2005 study. Kinks, by contrast, had only 2.1% reflection and some form of S&E was involved in half of all interaction (49.6%).

### **Analysis: Online learning collaboration-TAT**

In comparing Kinks.com data to that in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005), several similarities were observed. To start, all of the behaviors present in Fahy's two studies on formal postsecondary online learning communities were also present on Kinks.com. Kinks engaged in the same type of questioning, statement-making, reflective, and warming the environment behavior as did students in online learning environments bound to formal curricula. The main difference between the three studies is in the proportion of the behaviors that took place during the observation period.

The greatest dissimilarity between Kinks and the student groups that Fahy studied was with the amount of reflection and scaffolding and engaging activity that occurred. Kinks were almost 5.5 times less likely to engage in reflection than learners in Fahy (2003) and nearly nine times less likely to do so than students in Fahy (2005). However, Kinks worked to warm the environment through

scaffolding and engaging more than 3x more often than the Fahy (2003) group and greater than 4x more often than learners in Fahy (2005).

That Kinks behavior was so similar to that of students in conventional online learning environments on the more straightforward dimensions of learning collaboration (i.e. making statements and asking questions) but so dissimilar on the more nuanced, intimate measures is interesting. Kinks' strikingly higher rate of scaffolding and engaging is not surprising, given how salient cultural connection is on the site. Kinks likely expended so much more effort into warming their environment because the Kinks.com mission places such a high priority on this type of interaction. As first revealed in Chapter 4, the site sells itself as a family-like atmosphere; therefore, it would make sense that members would go out of their way to make others feel welcomed and nurtured. In contrast, their exceptionally low level of reflective behavior *is* unexpected; however, one wonders if the cultural realities of the site may have played a part here as well. For example, a cultural aversion to "putting one's business in the streets" may have influenced the degree to which the women were willing to share their innermost thoughts online. Perhaps the image of the "strong black woman" may have also lead few to portray themselves as anything but "together" at all times.

#### *Online learning collaboration-General*

There were 315 references to assessing learning and sharing solutions in the data. These categories help determine whether the typical learning pattern

seen in distributed learning communities (Wilson & Ryder, 1998) is present in Kinks.com. Data was collected for two main categories: assessing learning and sharing solutions.

#### Assessing learning

The data revealed 85 separate instances in which a Kink made a clear statement about what she had learned as a result of interactions on the site, as did this Kink who returned to a thread to report how she had applied newfound technical knowledge about knitting gauge size:

ok ladies, i took much consideration into what ya'll have told me about the gauge sizing. so i took my time, read the section in the book about gauging and tested it out. it wasn't as hard or complex as i thought. i guess since i'm very impatient when it comes to crochet projects, i try to find the biggest stitch and hook i can do so i can be done with the project sooner. however just like anything else, if you dont it right the first time, you wouldn't have any problems [blush].. lesson learned. thx again ladies...

In this entry, a member speaks to the knowledge she has gained about maintaining her locked hair:

**One thing I have learned from this forum** is no matter what amount of product you do or don't use, prolonged rinsing while massaging your scalp and squeezing the ends of your locs is amazing!

Another reveals how she recently learned how to correctly search the site:

Thank you, AKA08, for the search instructions. I have to confess that I was using the search function incorrectly. **As a newbie, I've posted repeat topics because my searches were ineffective. I can correct that now.....**

And a third shares what she has learned about options for transitioning from dreadlocks:

I always thought that the only way to release locs was to shave them off. **I'd never heard of simply undoing them until I joined Kinks...**

Sharing solutions

Solutions were resources intended to help resolve another member's stated problem or need. Kinks contributed 230 solutions to the interactions of the boards in the form of technical advice or specific information, as seen in these interactions (with full posts stating the problem for added context):

**Problem A:**

Brand Spankin New 2 Dreds, HELPPPPP!!!! Ok this is my second week with comb coil twist. I had it done last sat. and my head was itching so bad and so flaky, and was kinda loose by sat. i got it redone last night... (washed all the way out and redone)! But again my hair is kinda flaky.... my hair is short like 1inch [1]is there something I can do to stop the flakyness... [2] should i like twist

them when i have nothing to do...or just leave them alone... [3] how long should i wait before i wash my hair and how?..... [4] i use a due rag at night to keep them together but they are flat in the morn... is that fine or what? I JUST NEED SOME HELP! ANYTHING ANYONE CAN SAY CAN HELP... My friend twisted them and they look nice and full but I wanted to get advise like this from experienced individuals... THANKS SO MUCH!

**Solution:**

Is the flakiness coming from your scalp or your hair? What products were used for the twisting? If it's your scalp that is giving you a fit, try one part apple cider vinegar to 2 or 3 part water, pour this over your whole head and rinse. Now some folks are scared of water for baby locs so it depends on what you want to do. If the flakiness is coming from the hair itself then it's probably the product(s) that were used to twist the hair. Again a good rinse may be in order. If you are afraid of unraveling there are caps you can buy at the beauty supply store that you can wear over your twists while you rinse. Good Luck

**Problem B:**

So today was the first day of school and I started off my African American history class by asking "How do you define African American?" when someone politely raised their hand and said: A

person with bad hair. . . he didn't even say nappy. I didn't see that coming, but of course that set me off and I went into a 15 minute rant about good hair vs. bad hair and the rest of the class continued with debate and was led seriously off topic from the original question. Anyway, I wanted to continue that discussion with my students by providing them with some literature on the subject. I have searched this site and google, but obviously I'm putting in the wrong words, because I can't come up with anything. Can someone point me in the right direction or provide me with a link to an article on the good hair v. bad hair debate?

**Solution:**

Well I think this would be just as good as an article, because who doesn't love media!!! But in another section, I think health and wellness, I forget, a member posted a link to this vid which explains the good hair bad hair syndrome perfectly! [YouTube link]  
[YouTube link] And here's the link to the original thread [Kinks link]

**Problem C:**

^^^how did u learn how to latch hook your locks properly yourself.  
After the first six months i plan to maintain my own locs no matter how they are started.Need practice latching dreadlocks

**Solution:**

I practiced on my daughters (brats) doll head... you know the big one like the Barbie doll head that you could apply make-up to? I believe they still make the barbie big heads too. After I got the concept down, I began to practice on my head... a or two locks at a time until I became comfortable with my technique. ETA: Remember to check out the pinned topics. Here is a link to check out for latching tutorials: [Link to Kinks.com tutorial thread]

According to Wilson & Ryder (1998) learning in a DLC typically follows a 7-step pattern: 1) articulating the problem or need; 2) seeking help in a group forum; 3) engaging in a help consultation; 4) assessing learning; 5) sharing the solution; and 6) archiving the interaction for future reference. The seventh step is repeating steps 1-6 as necessary until new knowledge is integrated. The data reveals that all seven steps do in fact appear occur on Kinks.com; however, it was sometimes difficult to observe the entire pattern, from beginning to end, for all learning interactions. Kinks were under no obligation to continue communication after starting the helping process and many do not return to the thread to offer an update that would inform others that a workable solution had been found.

When the full learning pattern was observed on Kinks.com, the board's format slightly altered it: Steps 1-3 were collapsed, as were 5 and 6. Therefore, the Kinks.com pattern was 1) Stating the problem (articulating the problem or

need, seeking help in a group forum, engaging in a help consultation); 2) Assessing learning; and 3) Archiving the solution.<sup>49</sup> Two examples of the learning process in action on Kinks.com, with several posts from each thread for context, follow:

### **Learning Pattern Example A:**

(Articulating the problem or need; seeking help in a group forum, engaging in a help consultation)

#### **Learner:**

Here's a hat i made for my little sister some time ago... [image] i used the rasta pattern from the "Get Your Crochet On" book. Right now i'm making another one and i'm getting the same affect and i cant understand why. I made a gray one for myself before and it came out PERFECT! However i cant understand why when i tried to make more, i had this issue. Is it the yarn weight that makes a difference? The gray one i made for myself had a wool blend and was softer. The pink one in the above photo as well as the one i'm working on now is out of acrylic. Also, i'm relaxed when i crochet so i know its not the tension. I'm also conscious of the round count, so i dont think thats the problem either.... Does anybody possibly know what i may be doing wrong? Its irritating to me!!! [frown]

(help consultation, continued)

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<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that archiving happens by default on the boards, in the sense that all search and board display options will allow members to see threads from the board's debut date. However Kinks administrators often take the extra effort to place especially informative threads by including them in FAQ, sticky notes, or formal archives like the *Heat* board.



**Consultant A:**

Check your gage. It could be the yarn size. I never check my gage I am very bad about that [blush] So far I have never had a problem since I use the same type of yarn all the time. [big grin] The hat still looks good if you hadn't said anything I wouldn't have known it wasn't suppose to look like that.

**Learner:**

i thought checking the gage was pointless. *\*sigh\** i guess i'll do that.. maybe i did miss a stitch, iono i try to just "wing" it like i see many folks do, however it seems like that doesn't work in my favor [blush]

**Consultant B:**

Yes, gauge is very important! For the type of yarn you are using, you may need to use a smaller crochet hook. Even though you are following the pattern exactly, if your stiches are too big or too small, your item is gonna come out wonky. For example, if your pattern gage call for a size J hook, and the gauge is 4sc=1", then when you have 40sc, your item should be at 10".But, if when you start to crochet with a J hook, and your 4sc=1.5", by the time you get to 40sc, your item is 15", and it no longer looks like the picture! [rofl] I have the same problem with gauge, but I crochet tight, so I usually have to use a hook that is 2 sizes bigger than what the pattern

calls for. But honestly, just like MochaChocaLatta said, if you hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have known that isn't how it's supposed to look.

(assessing learning)

**Learner:**

ok ladies, i took much consideration into what ya'll have told me about the gauge sizing. so i took my time, read the section in the book about gauging and tested it out. it wasn't as hard or complex as i thought. i guess since i'm very impatient when it comes to crochet projects, i try to find the biggest stitch and hook i can do so i can be done with the project sooner. however just like anything else, if you dont it right the first time, you wouldn't have any problems [blush]..lesson learned. thx again ladies..

(shared solution is automatically archived)

**Learning Pattern Example B:**

(articulating the problem or need; seeking help in a group forum; engaging in a help

consultation)

**Learner:**

I had someone combine a few of my thin locs a few months ago but she's moved away. I really need to combine a few more but I don't know how. I did a search and found a lot of posts talking about combining locs but nothing about how to do it. Can someone

enlighten me please? Oh and do I leave the two headed loc that way or do I use rubberbands????? HELP [wink]

(help consultation, continued)

**Consultant A:**

Hey sis, I combined most of my locks by "threading" the weaker loc through the root bed of a stronger one. I guess if you latch to maintain your locs that's what i did. I did keep my " double dragons" just because I like them and i know they will mesh together. Sometimes when i retwist, I will palmroll them together to help them mesh or just wrap (or even braid) the loose hair around them both. I guess if you don't want the " double dragons" you could use thread to sew them together but I don't know much about the sewing. I hope I've helped a teeny bit

**Consultant B:**

I have also had repairs & combinations done and have done them myself using the kinky human hair for twists. With mine the hair was tied and braided in to add support. After I had many locs combined there were a few times that I had to do repairs myself. The first time around, I had a loctician combine many of my smaller sisterlocks (at the time) into one larger lock (I now have traditional locks) It took about 4 hours to have it all completed; she used a color matched curly/kinky human hair but not too much of it. She combined the locs via braiding, split/broke open the locked

ends of the old smaller locs (b/c otherwise they just stay in their tiny locked formation and won't make friends with their new cozy neighbor - and unlike Musiq, I was ready to let my 2 & 3 headed dragons go [smile] used the kinky human hair to provide a framework along the loc and continued braiding that hair into the freed up ends and beyond to seal each newly combined larger loc. A few times over the first few months since she did the big combination, one or two of the newly combined locs would have a middle or an end open up after washing. I would have to use a few strands of the remaining human hair to repair it. (How I did it: I tied the human hair at the base of my loc (at the scalp) and braided it around & thru the lock thru to the end, incorporating the unraveled strands of my loc into the braid. I did not really have the knowledge or confidence to do this before the locitian combined them for me. But I just paid attention to what she did that day and I remembered a woman who secured her own locs with thread from one of the sites I'd been directed to here on Kinks.com...and I figured if she could do it, I couldn't be any worse off for trying.. ). Then I'd just twist with gel like usual. In case you haven't already seen her site, the woman who I read about who used thread to combine her locs can be found here: [\[link to blog\]](#) Good Luck

### **Consultant C:**

I have combined quite a few of my locs. I have used a combination of every method listed here except adding kinky hair. I usually twist

or thread the weaker loc onto the stronger one and rubberband the loc about 1/2 way down and wait a few washes for the to mesh then cut the weaker loc off. I'll sew them together if they are not meshing fast enough for my taste then cut off the weaker loc.

**Consultant D:**

I have combined many of my locks (pics in fotki) i have used the method that looks like a fingerlatching to beginning with! A little hole with my finger, then I put the weaker lock into the stronger one and then double twist both until the end to have one lock. Sometimes at the end i use a black rubberband sometimes, i don't (depending on how fast the process goes. Anyway after a couple of weeks they are completly combined..[smile] I don't know if my explanations are clear but it's quite easy to do [smile]

(assessing learning)

**Learner:**

Thanks so much - I can always count on my Kinks family! [love] I decided not to have my locs wrapped - I just can't see myself buying human hair and shelling out the big \$\$\$ for upkeep. I combined a couple and it was easier than I thought it would be. I threaded the locs together at the roots, twisted them together and used rubberbands on the ends. My hair meshes quickly so I won't have to do any sewing or cutting. I found a great natural hair stylist

this past weekend that has a lot of DIY clients that she works with while she trains other stylists - if you don't mind having the trainee work on your hair. Thanks again!

(shared solution is automatically archived)

### **Analysis: Online learning collaboration-General**

In addition to comparisons to the online learning groups as seen in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005), Kinks data was examined for evidence of the 7-step pattern that Wilson & Ryder (1998) maintain learning typically follows in a distributed learning community. The learning process was observed on the board; however, locating full 1-7 step examples was difficult due to the fact that Kinks are free to walk away from a discussion, halting all communication at any time, something a student in a formal course presumably cannot do, at least without considerable risk to her grade. Interaction often ended abruptly during the learning process, with no indication if it was because the problem was solved and the original poster was not interested in reviving the thread to inform her help consultants, or if the Kink in need left the thread in frustration because none of the proffered solutions worked. Therefore, while the full OLC learning pattern exists on Kinks.com and the site meets the threshold, it must be acknowledged that any learning that takes place on informal sites such as Kinks.com may potentially be influenced by one's ability to walk away from the learning environment.

Wilson & Ryder (1998) also maintain that DLCs feature high levels of

communication and collaboration, commitment to shared goals and knowledge generation, flexible, negotiated learning activities, and autonomous members. This last characteristic may seem at odds with the study's previous findings, namely that Kinks had zero autonomy on the site. However, this conflict is resolved when one considers that autonomy is used in a different way in the measurement of control on Kinks.com. In the data, autonomy was defined as a member's ability to break from board conventions and openly voice an opinion that went against the site's bedrock principles. Given Kinks high norming and intolerance for outside perspectives that conflict with its stated mission and identity, when used in this context Kinks have no autonomy. However, when used as Wilson & Ryder do, Kinks have very high autonomy. They came and went as they pleased, chose the level of interaction they had (including zero), etc. It is important to note here that Kinks' lack of autonomy, as it is used in the first sense,, is a central characteristic of the site which decidedly informs the learning there; this issue will be explored in later chapters. However, with regard to Wilson & Ryder's definition of the term, Kinks.com meets the baseline requirement for this measure of distributed learning community.

According to the literature, DLCs come in two main types: bounded and dynamic. Bounded learning communities are attached to a structured learning environment with a formal teacher using a formal curriculum (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam & Dunlap, 2004). Based on this description, Kinks.com is not a bounded DLC. Kinks.com is structured with regard to rules and norms, but

its environment is distinctly informal and no member is set forth in an official Teacher, capital T, role. Furthermore, there is no set curricula, no official standards that spell out the steps and timeframes by which each learner must reach competency, and no formal grading system.

Dynamic DLCs are made up of groups of learners who chose to create knowledge together in a self-organized and self-negotiated environment (Wilson & Ryder, 1996). This type of DLC has decentralized control, is learner-centered and learner run, and features membership at different levels of expertise (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Dede, 2004a; Oblinger, 2008). Different levels of expertise clearly exist on the site (most often seen in the distinction between veterans and newbies). However, whether Kinks.com meets the definition of a dynamic DLC is up for debate. Certainly, there is a control hierarchy on Kinks.com, with the most power given to administrators, who are themselves ordered with Teena on top. Regular members may report each other and even recommend that a particular Kink's posting privileges be revoked, but only administrators have the ability to suspend or expel members. They can also edit all members' posts, lock threads, approve registration requests, etc. In this way, regular members ("learners") do not run the site and Kinks.com does not possess this key characteristic of a dynamic DLC.

Conversely, because no Kink (not even Teena) is placed in the position of formal teacher, all Kinks are learners (including Teena, who explicitly refuses to claim any professional knowledge or expertise on the topic of natural hair). With



the exception of those held by Teena, administrator privileges apply during a shift, but moderators are themselves regular members when off-duty. Working within that framework, members decide which learning is made available to the broader group through the act of starting a new thread and/or deciding to post a reply in an existing thread. Knowledge generation is determined by the act of letting a thread die or pushing it to thrive. Finally, according to the site's owner, Kinks.com was created as and remains a space created by a small group to support a particular kind of learning that did not seem to be available elsewhere. In her own words:

I found a few scattered websites here and there. Some dedicated to hair, some dedicated to race. Many talked about pride in their natural kinks and curls but ALL talked about straightening and relaxing and were loaded with photos of relaxed hair styles.

A group of us \*nappyheads\* began coalescing around a single theme: We loved our "nappy" hair and we did not want to talk about straightening it. We want to talk about working WITH our texture and not AGAINST it. There were about 20 of us in that early group and we were all searching for the same thing. A place where we could get together and share pictures, style ideas and products. Compare styling techniques and show mutual love and support for our decision to wear our hair natural and be proud and nappy.

Launched on April 20, 2002 we started out as a single web page portal of links to our web albums. Then moved on to a few pages of informational articles. Soon after, we formed a Yahoo! group (still in existence though only for historical reasons) but it didn't have enough features. We created our own discussion board and grew from there to the incredible community we are today.

Kinks.com has ebbed and flowed with the times over the last 7 years but I have never lost sight of the original reason behind creating this haven. I have learned so much from the women here and continue to be inspired every day by what I read on the forums. It is a place for support and friendship. It is a place for learning and growth. It is a place for sisterhood (and brotherhood).

*(Behind the Dream, Kinks.com)*

From this perspective, Kinks.com can be called a learner-centered, learner-run space, albeit one with a very specific cultural mission (and an owner, which will be discussed in the next section). If this is the case, rather than not being a dynamic DLC, Kinks.com is a very specific kind of dynamic DLC, one where mission is inextricably bound to control and both are then fused to whatever learning occurs on the site. This relationship between the Kinks mission and the levels of control on the site will be examined in later chapters.

According to Luppicini (2003) there are six types of online learning communities. Knowledge building OLCs feature strong autonomy and self-

expression, high opportunity for integrating new ideas and perspectives from outside the group, actively involved moderators, and a formal environment-- characteristics that do not immediately bring to mind Kinks.com. Kinks.com has efforts to understand and collaborate with others in common with the second type of OLC, the inquiry OLC, but not much else. Like its knowledge building counterpart, the inquiry OLC welcomes outside ideas, has actively involved moderators and a formal environment. Kinks.com shares strong group norms and efforts to collaborate with other members with an OLC of practice, but is not a formal environment with highly active moderators. Socialization OLCs have minimal direct involvement by moderators, group identity and attachment, and an informal environment in common with Kinks.com; but they also have moderate group norms, whereas Kinks' norming is very strong. Finally, Counseling and Development OLCs feature efforts to understand and empathize with others which Kinks.com certainly possesses; however, their strong autonomy and self-expression, actively involved moderators and formal environment are not characteristic of Kinks.com.

Where the other five Lippicini (2003) OLC types have little in common with Kinks.com, the sixth category, the Culture OLC, accurately describes the Kinks community. Culture OLCs feature:

- Strong group norms
- Shared sense of history and ideology
- Low direct moderator intervention

- Informal environment
- Efforts to understand and cooperate with others (within the framework of the site's mission)

#### *Additional dimensions of Kinks.com*

Earlier, the idea that Kinks.com is an unconventional type of dynamic DLC due to specific characteristics of mission and control was introduced. This divergence from traditional dynamic DLCs is evident in three main ways: exposure of members to direct marketing, emphasis on of status, and enforcement of rules that explicitly exclude some perspectives.

#### *Marketing*

As discussed in Chapter 4, Kinks.com hosts a significant number of advertisements on its pages. Some, like the small haircare company that markets natural products to Kinks, are relatively general. Others, such as ads from Google which are chosen based on location information gleaned from users' IP addresses, are more sophisticated. All are paid. Subscriptions are another revenue stream. Kinks.com offers them in monthly and annual versions, with the current annual price at twenty dollars. Lastly, members are encouraged to donate money or subscriptions to the site to assist with maintenance costs.

A learning community like Kinks.com presents several unique financial considerations that may make advertising dollars especially attractive. To start, unlike traditional learning communities Kinks.com does not charge tuition and fees or receive taxpayer funds. Further, Kinks.com is owned in its entirety by a

private individual, Teena, which affords her substantial administrative and cultural power but also means that she is solely responsible for the operating costs. Subscriptions and donations are at the discretion of members. The total revenue Teena receives from these sources is unknown; however, she writes in “Behind the Dream”:

Kinks.com is still owned and operated by me and volunteers who help out on the forums and behind the scenes. There are no corporate interests or benefactors. It is 100% funded by me with help from advertisements, donations and subscriptions from members.

No Kink, regardless of subscription status, can escape advertisements on the site; subscribing merely decreases the number of ads a user sees as she browses. However, modern learners are no strangers to advertising in educational environments. Each year, marketers create quid pro quo relationships with learning institutions at every level, relationships that offer cash or other rewards in exchange for delivering a captive audience of consumers. For example, affinity agreements between credit card companies and various university alumni associations came to light in mid-2010 when it was revealed that such organizations have received millions of dollars and a cut of their student debt from banks in trade for marketing the cards to students and selling mailing lists (Edelsburg, 2010; Protess & Newmann, 2010; Sullivan, 2010). The debate over the implications and ethics of Channel One, commercialized

fundraising (e.g. pizza and candy sales), fast food restaurants and soft drink companies in school cafeterias and hallways, and other commercial ventures in K-12 institutions has raged for two decades (Blokhuys, 2008; Brent, 2009; Molnar, 2005) and corporations routinely purchase naming rights to educational spaces: athletic venues (e.g. University of Louisville's Papa John's Cardinal Stadium, University of Minnesota's TCF Bank Stadium, Texas Tech's Jones AT&T Stadium, etc.), classrooms, and even classes themselves (Gray, 2009).

### *Status*

Status counts on Kinks.com and information about one's standing is transmitted in many ways both subtle and explicit. The first line is that between insider and outsider. Only the most general areas (e.g. homepage, mission statement, haircare articles, etc.) are open to the public and non-members are barred from the forums, the heart of the site. Registration is straightforward, free and ostensibly open to anyone<sup>50</sup>; but it is required in order to interact with the community.

Members are separated into four main tiers, with Teena at the top, followed by anonymous moderators, then subscribed members, and general members at the bottom. From their first day, general members have almost complete run of the boards and may read the blogs and all public boards and post in all public boards except *Commercial Products*, which requires a minimum total post count of 100. The only board from which they are excluded is also the

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<sup>50</sup> Administrators approve registration requests and their process is not public. No information is available for how many, if any, requests are rejected.

only private board: the Pink Ladies Lounge, which is reserved for subscribers. Moderators, who are handpicked by Teena and anonymous to all but her, have complete access to all areas of the forum, but answer to Teena, who has the final say on all site matters. Although moderators are selected from the ranks of the subscribed class and so have a subscribed alterego, when they are in moderator mode they have tremendous power. They may edit or remove posts and defying a moderator's directive is grounds for expulsion from the site.

There is little social mobility on Kinks.com. Unless Teena decides to sell shares in the site, no one but her will ever hold the top berth. There are approximately a half dozen moderators at any given time, and to be chosen, one has to draw and sustain Teena's positive attention. In addition to gaining a reputation among your peers as being highly knowledgeable, others may gain status in three main ways: subscription, post count, and join date, all of which are readily observable in a member's posts<sup>51</sup>. Subscription is the fastest (and most expensive) path to increased rank on Kinks.com. There is no waiting period for subscription, so a newbie is free to subscribe the same day she joins and enjoy the increased perks immediately. Subscribers have access to the private lounge (which does not even show up on the forum list view for non-subscribers) as well as immediate posting privileges in the *Commercial Products* board. Finally, their screen-names are in bolded pink font wherever they appear on the site and the

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<sup>51</sup> The fourth way, reputation, is new and appears to be confusing for many. Presumably, it will be a useful status marker once the general comfort level improves. Teena has already stated that she will use it in her decisions re: to whom to donate a subscription.

tagline underneath their avatar reads “Subscribed and PINK!” by default. Post count gives another clue to rank, as high ones are associated with longevity and “elder statesman” qualities. Join date achieves this as well; the closer to Kinks.com’s April 2002 launch date, the more impressive.

Social status is evident in more conventional learning environments (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009; Vratulis & Dobson, 2008). In a traditional OLC, the instructor holds more immediate power than students, as she would have the power to lay out the course, outline rules of discussion and behavior in the syllabus, and confer grades; this balanced by students’ willingness to follow directives and their ability to evaluate the course both formally and informally via word-of-mouth. No neat parallel exists between conventional OLCs and Kinks.com. On Kinks, there is no curriculum and no grading. Further, as is the case in all dynamic distributed learning communities, no one is set up as Teacher. Teena is regarded (and regards herself) as more of a Big Mama guiding figure whose advice is drawn from life experience rather than professional expertise.

The most glaring status-related difference between the site and traditional learning spaces is that on Kinks.com, social rank is at least partially available for outright purchase. Again it must be argued that the same is true in the “real” world, although (sometimes) less explicitly. Outward status markers (e.g. expensive clothing) that others respond favorably to in school settings are not free. Neither are the perks of birth and breeding that form the foundation and



fundamentals for academic success. The difference, then, may be that pay to play is made so explicit on the site. High post counts and longevity will garner respect and attention, eventually. Yet buying a subscription gives you increased social standing immediately, and has many intangible perks as well, not the least being that a paid subscription is a clear way to show one's commitment to KinkThink and therefore to position oneself as a potential moderator.

### *Rules and Enforcement*

Setting ground rules is an important part of designing an online learning environment (Chen, Wang & Hung, 2009, Wilson, Ludwig-Hardmann, Thornam & Dunlap, 2004) and instructors in traditional OLCs sometimes employ students to serve as moderators and facilitators in online class discussions (Correia & Baran, 2010; Moar, 2003). However, while peer moderators and clear rule-setting are not unusual, the manner in which they are used on Kinks.com appears to be. Kinks.com rules are explicit and constantly reiterated, and corrective action for infractions is swift, virtually guaranteed and often public. Board filters automatically change words that are deemed objectionable, anonymous moderators step in to actively edit posts or openly reprimand members and members willingly police each other. This final dimension, the inflexible borders on Kinks.com and the lengths to which the community goes to patrol them, is the site's main departure from traditional collaborative learning spaces. This characteristic, its roots and role will be discussed further in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

Kinks.com has several commonalities with conventional online learning environments. Questioning and statement-making on the site is very similar to that in formal online learning communities, such as Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005). The multi-step learning pattern which Wilson & Ryder (1998) identify as a characteristic of distributed learning is present on Kinks.com, although sometimes compressed from seven steps to three due to board functions (e.g. automatic archiving). Learners are free to come and go as they please and to tailor the level of interaction to their individual preference, thereby demonstrating a high level of autonomy or control over time, space, and place, which is another feature of distributed learning communities. With its strong group norms, shared sense of history and ideology, low direct moderator intervention, informal environment and efforts to understand and cooperate with others (within a framework of the site's mission), Kinks.com fits the definition of Luppicini's (2003) online learning community of culture. Taken as a whole, Kinks.com is a dynamic distributed learning community of culture.

Importantly, there are also differences between Kinks.com and its traditional counterparts. Its high level of control, as well as its private ownership, overt status markers, and availability to commercial advertising suggest that Kinks.com is a unique kind of dynamic distributed learning community. Kinks.com is a strikingly "warmer" place, with learners expending much more effort toward scaffolding and engaging than students in conventional online learning

environments. Kinks are also much less reflective than other online learners. These two features are thought to be associated with cultural forces at work on the site, namely a high priority on familial-style interaction and cultural identity characteristics that may deter black women from appearing weak or otherwise inappropriately open with intimate thoughts.

Maintenance of group identity is a principal goal of Kinks.com and the understanding the nuances of mission, culture, and control on the site is key to understanding how Kinks.com is a unique dynamic distributed learning community of culture. Chapter 6 begins to explore Kinks identity and investigates its impact on the collaborative learning that takes place there.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **VOICES FROM THE GAPS II**

#### **Introduction**

As black women, Kinks are proud of their shared heritage and history and put great effort into personalizing the environment and supporting each other through an often difficult learning process however that is balanced by exceptionally strong group norms that mean that a successful Kink must not only be firmly rooted in a black, female, and natural cultural identity but must also quickly come to internalize the ideology and traditions of the Kinks cultural space. That Kinks spend so much more energy warming their community than did students in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005) may be important because it is likely due to the way that cultural connection among black women and familial relationships are stressed on the site.

Chapter 6 seeks to provide more insight into Kinks.com as a learning environment by exploring what impact a sense of shared culture has on this learning community. To do this, Kinks data is further analyzed with regard to the remaining two research questions. The third question addresses the main features of black women's communication and learning. The final research question investigates Kinks.com as a uniquely black woman's space.

**Research question III: What are the main features of black women's communication and learning?**

*A word takes on different meaning depending on the user. It's simple linguistics and people know that.*

*(Culture)*

Black women's informal communication references contain examples of how black women use language 1) in general and 2) to show solidarity and black identity. This data will help to determine the main features of black women's communication in learning collaboration on Kinks.com. Table 6.1 shows an overview of the data collected for the exploration of the second research question:

**Table 6.1** Overview of black women's informal communication data

Code	# of References
	<i>Black women's talk</i>
Informal BE only	0
Codeswitching/Formal BE	269
<b>Total Black women's talk</b>	<b>269</b>
(Talking like a black woman)	(3)
	<i>Identity &amp; Solidarity</i>
Black identity & solidarity	237
Brother	7
Culture Call	26
Girl	53
Look	2
Queen, Honey	11
Racism	48
Sexism	15
Sister	59
White People	61
Total Identity & Solidarity	519

**Black women's talk**

There were 269 cases in the data code *black women's talk*. Of these, only three were of a member referring to *how* black women talk. All three references appear below. In the first example, a Kink parodies "black" speech during a discussion of the differences between black and white women's hair in which she maintains that white women's hair has more versatility:

Fact is fact, whether you like them or not. I am sure, white women don't like the fact that black skin does not age. So be it. Just like you, you can talk about the exception, or how something ain't so when it is SO. **I can deal with that fact without being upset about it, or assigning some past historical "poor me, i be black wit dis hair" whine to the conversation.**

In the second and third cases, which occurred in the same thread on the impact “sounding black” has on earnings; two Kinks deconstruct what it means to sound “black”:

- Reading this thread I kept asking myself what "sounding black" meant. Does that mean you can't conjugate a verb? Does that mean you only finished the third grade? Does that mean you have a NJ or GA accent? When will we reject these studies that align our race with mediocrity and ignorance. I sound like an educated American. And I'm proud of it.
- ITA LMP<sup>52</sup>...As I have stated I am a southerner. I agree that some of us have 'very' strong accents...some might call it a 'drawal' (sp?) But if you spend anytime in the south talking to whites you will hear that they have very strong accents as well. I can distinguish a southern black and a southern white 'most' of the time. Both have been known to butcher the English language LOL!

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<sup>52</sup>ITA LMP= I totally agree, like many people...

Of the communication that could be described as “black women’s talk”, 100% of it was a blend of some degree of informal BE and Standard English, which is referred to in the study as Formal BE (Hobbs, 2004). The following examples illustrate some of the ways that Kinks used Formal BE to communicate with other black women. The first pair of examples is of very formal code-switching, wherein Kinks obeyed standard syntax and grammar rules but peppered their sentences with coded language. In the first post, the author uses “when I get ready to read them,” black slang for telling someone off, during a conversation with another member who had recently been told that she needed to straighten her hair for work:

Happens to me all the time and the sad part is that they don't even realize they are being offensive. Telling me that I need to straighten my hair somehow implies that there is something wrong with the way it is, which I am not having. So **when I get ready to read them**, they don't understand where they went wrong. Now I just tell them, you worry about your own hair and I'll worry about mine....Good day!

In the second case, a member ends her comment on a fellow Kink’s negative experience with another (non-Kink) natural with “I had to release relax and let it go!” which is a quote from the *Cosby Show* spinoff, *A Different World*:

I understand how you feel, It's very frustrating. Even so to hear that type of comment from another natural. I received a comment when



I wore my hair in a wash n go to work about it looking like I had a gheri curl and what chemicals did I put it in to make it look like that. I just shrugged it off but it did bother me . I had to tell myself that people arent that informed about natural hair and assume alot natural hair is just simply " nappy " . **So I had to release relax and let it go!**

The next two examples are of informal code-switching, with more marked shifts between BE and SE. The first commenter starts off in BE to emphasize her shocked yet amused reaction to learn that another Kink paid \$150 to get her hair braided, then switches to SE to give a serious answer to the OP's question. She uses "OK" to mark the shift.

\$150 GOOOD LLLAAAWWWWDFDD ... child you better learn to do them braids yo dayum self. **ok** braiding and twisting is good to keep it stretched and to avoid knots and tangles if you wear it loose, but it wont do much to make it soft.. from my experience, softness comes from diet and products you use on your hair.

The second poster begins her comment about removing and reducing the amount of lint that collects in her locs in SE, switches to BE to gush over her male companion, and then back to SE to finish her comment. She uses parentheses to mark her shift:

I'm shocked. He got almost all of it out last night. (Dat man. Sigh. He pisses me off in so many ways, but he know the way to my

heart is through my hair. So relaxing. I snoozed through it and was totally in love with him by the time he was done.) From here on out I think I'll try brushing to keep the lint out. I'll also make sure to only use my microfiber towel. But I can't promise I'll stay away from my sweaters this fall/winter...

The final pair of examples concern Formal BE using black oral traditions. The first poster employs rhyming (i.e. “meticulous and ridiculous” and “fried dyed and laid to the side”), a familiar oratorical tactic in the black church:

I remember back in the day buying hair mags and wishing and hoping they had styles that I could get with. But the natural style and even the braids section was so non existent it was like what was the point? I guess because it is a hair magazine they have to touch on every style issue and ways of wearing our hair. They just still end to display the **fried dyed and laid to the side styles**. And the majority of the styles are are **meticulous or ridiculous** that who would wear their hair like that on a daily basis? [huh]

The second author has written a classic call to action, using the word “we” and repetitive sentence structure (i.e., “We need...”) to show solidarity, to drive home the point that she is part of the very community she critiques (Hobbs, 1994):

We need to stop watching so much television and looking at Magazines with tons of photoshop work and get a clue. We need to

start loving and embracing our heritage and culture. We need to embrace our nappy hair, big noses, wide hips, thick lips, and big butts. We need to embrace our Nubian/African beauty.

### **Black identity and solidarity**

Much like the poster in the final example above, Kinks often used language to establish solidarity and to affirm their identity as black women. They were roughly as likely to speak specifically about the black community and what it means to be black (237 cases) as they were to use a form of black woman's talk such as code-switching (270 cases). This section explores the data on black identity and community solidarity to further examine the distinguishing characteristics of black women's informal communication.

Who is black? How do you know? Who decides? Are blacks a monolith? Kinks used the discussion boards to address these questions and other issues of black identity, often calling on their black woman's talk to make their point. For example, note how this poster code-switches (i.e. She don't represent...) to emphasize the distance between herself and Soledad O'Brien, someone she feels is not authentically black. This post was part of a board discussion on whether O'Brien, who identifies as a black woman but whose appearance is racially ambiguous, was the right choice as host of CNN's *Black in America* series:

**She don't represent Black women or the Black family**, no matter who she identifies with. Anyway, she was only used to "host" the

CNN show. Nothing more. So it doesn't really matter whether she truly reps Black America or not. They could have had anyone to host that garbage.

This poster uses informal BE to tease a member about not knowing something she “should” know as a black person, in this case that singer Lalah Hathaway is the daughter of the late soul singer Donnie Hathaway. Kink 1’s first post was entirely in SE, but her reply mixes in BE (i.e. “not on game”) to show that Kink 2’s good-natured ribbing had hit its mark:

**Kink 1:** Gorgeous pics TwinT. I never heard of her before. Is she a new artist with Jazz? I have been out the loop lately with my music selections and do not know whats what currently! LOL.

**Kink 2:** “I’m gonna give you a chance to edit this then I’ll come back and we’ll act like this never happened. m’kay? Naw, but that’s Lalah Hathaway, baby. Donnie’s lil girl?”

**Kink 1:** I PM'd<sup>53</sup> you TwinT! I have a new person to salivate over in music. **I am the only one up in this thread not on game....but I will be!**

In a third case, a poster responds to another member’s request for clarification of the meaning of the term “kitchen.”<sup>54</sup> The confused Kink uses coded language (referring to herself as a white woman) in acknowledgment that she has failed to

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<sup>53</sup> Private message = PM

<sup>54</sup> The term *kitchen* is used in the black community to refer to the nape area of the head.

understand a black term that she “should” know and therefore risks being seen as authentically black by her peers. The remaining posts give further context to her “confession,” as she is joined by another commenter who makes a similar admission as well as by two more Kinks who seemed genuinely surprised (and amused) by their cultural lapse. Note, too, how the second “confessor” uses coded language (e.g. references to Spike Lee’s *School Daze* and her “black card”) as proof that she is an insider despite not being familiar with this particular term:

**Kink 1:** Excuse me for having a blond moment, but what the heck is a kitchen, referring to the hair and what exactly is locks referring (actual dread locks) or hair itself [dunno] Ive always been perplexed at the way this term is used [yawn] Geeze I need to go to bed, school starts in 6 hours

*(Several posts explaining what a “kitchen” is)*

**Kink 2:** i just found out what a kitchen was a few years ago. even though i knew all the words to the song "good and bad hair", from school daze, i never knew what they were talking about. i didn't want to ask because i didn't want my black card taken away from me. [tongue]

**Kink 3:** ^^ I would've been the first in line to take it. [laugh] It just goes to show that we can't assume everyone has the (Black) same

experience. I didn't even bother coming in this thread 'til to day b/c I thought it was a joke.

**Kink 4:** “^^^Agreed. [laugh] I was chuckling my azz off when I read the question at hand [laugh] Just goes to show, right? [laugh]

As illustrated above, Kinks used certain features of their language as an informal test of other black women's access to a shared knowledge base. They dropped references into conversation that they assumed would be immediately recognizable to a cultural insider. The study refers to this behavior as *Culture Call*, a specific type of coded talk that employs a pop cultural reference as a signal that can only be heard by one's intended audience. Examples of the 26 observed cases of Culture Call follow.

In this first case, a Kink responds to the OP's complaint about her boss, who compared her short hairdo to “raisins” and to the style worn by the mother on 70s sitcom, *Good Times*. The television show is not cited by name; instead, the commenter simply mentions the character with the presumption that other black women would know 1) who she was and 2) how her hair looked:

**Kink 1:** one of my bosses told me that i looked like **florida evans** with my twa<sup>55</sup>. [Do I think he was kidding?] No...I actually think he was serious. He's one of “those” brothers.

**Kink 2:** i think I would have a few choice words for him, since you said he was serious and one of ‘those’ brothers. you should have

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<sup>55</sup> TWA=teeny weeny afro

told him that if his mother, sister, or girlfriend was true to herself and her natural beauty, she would be picking raisins too.

Here, a Kink responds to a complaint of black men with damaged perms by inviting people to visit Chicago, which she claims is the “home” of men with similar hairstyles. She also Culture Calls a derogatory nickname (i.e. “A Pimp Named Slickback”) that a popular black gossip site regularly uses to refer to a specific black actor:

Come to Chicago. We are the home of Bros with Busted Butters. It just makes me want to cry sometimes when I see young men walking around with their hair looking a hawt, sweaty, **A Pimp Named Slickback'd** mess.

Kinks also used language to make direct appeals to black community solidarity, employing “we” and “our” to draw a line between “us” and “them” racially. In the first excerpt, a Kink weaves repeated uses of the word “black” and the phrase “exclusively ours” in her home-first call to action/critique of Korean presence in the black beauty supply industry:

I don't think the majority of these stores are going out of business. I'm from D.C, where there are plenty of Nappies, but I'm in Cleveland right now where there seem to be very few. In both places, there's no shortage of supersized Korean owned beauty supply stores full of every type of CFC, weave, wig, flaming tool of torture, and bad customer service (from my experience) Why

should we be concerned with people who purposely exclude BOBS (black owned beauty supplies) from being able to purchase or even carry certain products losing their jobs? They produce a news magazine about black hair care products written strictly in Korean. Trust, they are making money hand over fist off of something that should be exclusively ours. Unfortunately not too many people seem to care who they get their products from or how they get them. Many of these stores are owned by the same family or group.

In this example, taken from a thread titled “Bringing the Permie Mentality to Dreadlocks,” a commenter begins the thread with a disclaimer and ends with an appeal to others’ sense of racial solidarity. She writes:

ok, so im sure im gonna get roasted for this topic, but hey at least it's something that will get us thinking...i hope [smile]. [Text of post about trying to force your locks to behave as straightened hair would] \*\*\*and please, that 'do you' thing is in full effect...i AM doing me. ME means that i think, care, and wonder about US in addition to taking care of self. i see us all as brothers and sisters, so in you i see myself and vice versa, so there. NO i'm NOT judging, i'm observing, commenting, and looking for adult discourse. i only say this because i notice that sometimes folks get highly defensive, emotional, sensitive, and dismissive when topics like this come up.\*\*\*



Scott (2002) suggests that black women use the words “girl” and “look” as a marker of solidarity and identity. They use girl when they are comfortable in the knowledge that are among sisters who will validate their identity as a black woman, often as an indication that a code-switch is about to occur. Kinks used *girl* in exactly the way Scott posits (i.e. to show solidarity in a shared identity as a black woman and/or to mark a code-switch). This type of usage appeared 53 times throughout Kinks interactions, several examples of which follow:

- **Girl**, wees on the same page...
- **girl**...u kinda like me i thought my head was too big for a BC so i jus did my own braids and twists in the back, n corn rows in the front...for a whole year!!!the pic u see there - i took that just a few mins after i cut the permed ends off. u'll be just fine!!! [big grin]
- **girl**, dont worry, its okay to vent!! we are here for you. i can totally relate to your experience!!
- **Girrlllll** please list the products that your using.
- i feel yah **girl**! i was there and still there! it takes time
- Yeah **girl**, I wouldn't even rely on anyone else's support. You'll find it here, [love] but even so, someone will always have something to say about what you're doing and how you're doing it. You can't please everyone so don't try to....only do what pleases you! [smile] You can't go wrong if you do that! You're not being a baby either. Its understandable because this is a big deal! I wish your friends

were more supportive especially since they are natural themselves.

It always amazes me how sometimes the least supportive people are other naturals. [roll eyes] Its all good though! We got your back!

[smile]

Kinks also used forms of the word *sister* (e.g. sis, sista, sistah, etc.) and other words such as *queen* and *honey* much like they used *girl*, to show solidarity and shared black identity. Kinks were actually slightly more likely to use a variant of sister (59 instances) than girl (53 cases):

- [Kink 1: That shirt is that fiyah-fiyah!] Kink 2: lol, thank you. I got it at an African festival. You should have seen my mother's eyes. Priceless, **sis**....priceless. lol
- However, **sistah gyrl**, like ya said thangs have changed.
- "So, **sis**, deal with ur mental. Keep cleaning the inside, in the meantime, trust and know that your hair is growing.
- Just needed to share, thanks **sistren**.
- I will compliment a **sistah** in a heart beat. I just believe in African/African American love and unity. It gives me just as much pleasure giving a **sistah**/brotha thumbs up as it probably does for those receiving the compliment.
- Look at the bigger picture **sister**.
- ....In any event, I am grateful that I found this forum because repeat threads or not, it has helped me immensely. Thank you **sistren**.

- **Sis**, I so totally understand where you are coming from.
- I'm scheduled for a hair cut on October 4th and I'd really like to order some headwraps, but only if I can wear them with no hair.....Enlighten a **sista** ladies

There were 11 occurrences of “queen,” “honey,” “mama,” etc., some listed here:

- **HONEEEYYYYYY!!!!**
- **honey**, if you find out please tell me because i too find it very difficult to prevent lint.
- like this [photo of attractive actor], **mama?** or this [photo of attractive actor]? [tongue]
- I say screw what your family thinks, cut it off and walk around with your head held high like a **queen**. CAN'T NOBODY TELL YOU NOTHIN. That needs to be your mantra.

According to Scott (2002), *look* is another word that black women use as an expression of identity. Scott observes that black women use the word as a sort of warning to let people (particularly whites) know that a line has been crossed. Moreover, similar to how *girl* was used in the study, *look* often immediately precedes a code-switch. As first suggested in footnote 14, black women may in fact use “look” as code-switch marker that is an all-purpose warning device to let anyone know (white or otherwise) that they have crossed a boundary. Kinks used look only twice in the data, each time in the latter way; both references are included below.

In the first case, a Kink uses “look” to voice frustration at another member’s use of the explanation “[she has] Indian in her family” as proof that entertainer Janet Jackson is not very kinky. Her comment begins with coded language to acknowledge that she has picked up on the phenotypic defense that runs so deeply in black culture that it once motivated Zora Neale Hurston to write, “I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was *not* an Indian chief”<sup>56</sup>:

[laugh] yeah yea yeah, who doesn't...their family, my family, and about fifteen hundred others on my block. **Look**, I believe that the hair in "Why did i get married" was Janet's. And I believe it was natural.

In the second reference, a Kink also uses the “look” to show frustration, this time with a loc technician who refuses to style her hair to her specifications. She has become frustrated by not being treated the way she believes a paying customer should and is entertaining the thought of reporting the stylist to his supervisor. She role-plays her potential response to the situation and uses the word “look” as a marker for her shift to more forceful language that pulls rank on the defiant hairdresser:

The guy who twist my hair keeps saying its too short on lower back part and they won't keep, but my question is "if you can twist it for

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<sup>56</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale. “How it feels to be colored me”. Retrieved from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/grand-jean/Hurston/Chapters/how.html>

single coil, why can't yo start my locs" he said, he uses diff products to start the locs, meaning no brown gel I guess. Should I just say **look**, I'm paying you start my damn locs? Or just have his boss do them? [unsure] [unsure] [unsure]

Discussions of issues that face the black community (e.g. racism, sexism, and non-blacks in general, etc.) comprised a total of 124 cases in the data. There were a total of 48 references to racism and its impact on the black community, including this comment in a board discussion on the *shopping while black* phenomenon, in which a poster warns that being a “good” citizen will not save a black person from the realities of racism:

...and despite all of this, there are still those who believe that if we only do everything that we're supposed to do, we won't experience racism. No one is above it.

And in a thread titled “The Complaining African American, stereotype or not?” a Kink shares her frustration that blacks are often seen as playing the victim when they mount a legitimate critique of American race relations:

People tend to get pissed when black folks speak out about things like institutionalized racism and start calling names like 'perpetual victim' and 'whiner'. Seems that everyone else gets a platform to vent: white feminists, PETA, and other ethnic groups who feel that they need to stick it to the man, and they are sometimes even

hailed as trailblazers for doing it. Yet black folks are supposed to just STFU.

The author of this post adds her voice in response to the thread, “Why are we ‘more likely’ to die from everything? I really want to know!” which was started by a Kink who became distressed by the results her impromptu Google search for “blacks more likely” generated:

I think the stress of living in a society that demeans and denigrates you adds to this also. Stress wears a body down and makes you more susceptible to illness...sounds simplistic, but I really think living in a racist society adds to our stress and harms us in ways that we may never be aware of....

Kinks discussed their concern over the current socioeconomic state of the black community and brainstormed ideas for community uplift. Here, a Kink sparks conversation in a thread dedicated to Frederick Douglass’ 1852 speech “The meaning of July Fourth to the Negro” and a discussion of social issues facing the modern black community:

Which ones do *you* think we can fix and how? Better yet, which ones are self-inflicted and which ones are the result of some outside influence? Please explain your concept of ‘oppression.’

This poster used her own experiences to personalize her response in a discussion on classism in the black community, agreeing with an earlier commenter that one can *come up* socioeconomically without becoming “bougie,”

slang for members of the black middle class who look down on those lower on the socioeconomic ladder:

But, I completely agree with you which is another reason why I get so annoyed when people go on and on about how lazy, ignorant, tactless etc. we are. And as a bred in the hood sistah, now suburbanite soccer mom (but nevah bougie) I'm frankly sick of the classism in our communities. We have accomplished AMAZING things considering what we've been through. I can't think of any community in the world that's suffered the kind of constant terror and attacks on their humanity, family structure and community that has still managed to keep rising from the ashes. If Phoenixes exist they are the descendants of kidnapped Africans enslaved in the U.S. of A. White folks don't like it, and brainwashed Black folks don't like it, but we HAVE to keep telling it. The problem is not that Black folks blame racism for too many of their problems, the problem is that we don't recognize just how much destruction White supremacy has caused and how we *\*must\** rebuild family and community before we can ever help to reach spiritual, psychological and financial success in this nation.

This comment was drawn from a conversation on the current state of hip hop music and its potential role in the stereotyping of the black community:

I feel if you further stereotypes in your music, we can't act surprised that others will assume they are true....even the cops...if you are part of the problem. Maybe if we had more music out there that is positive and not always about "money, sex, drugs, and hoes" police officers would take us more seriously. In the end, every black male will be looked at as a "thug" and I really feel a lot of it has to do with the music and how they portray black males. Its still not right for people to treat us unfairly, but I'm just saying we still have some things we can and need to change amongst ourselves to make the situation better instead of acting like we don't understand why we are treated so differently.

While the author of this post explores her feelings on the African diaspora and black Americans place within it, in a thread dedicated to the topic. She is directly responding to an earlier commenter whose post included a quote by cultural critic/comedian Paul Mooney, "Why do I have to go to Africa...I was stolen, how come no one is coming to Brooklyn to find me?":

And that's my sentiment. I used to wonder why many Black Americans had this objection to embracing anything African and why many Blacks would vehemently say "I'm not African". But I came to realize that no one has ever embraced us so I can't be upset at someone who doesn't feel a connection. Sometimes I feel like we are the most unwanted, displaced group of people in the



history of this world. Black Americans are treated like Black Sheep. I think we recognize that and carry that with us. And I think that's why, in many cases, we are as close as we are to each other and can relate to each other the way we do, particularly during trying times. We know that no one has our back or understands us like each other. One would think that there would be more of an desire of many Africans (particularly Western Africans) to want to have more of a kinship with Black Americans (and in the Carribean for that matter) but that isn't the case. Just like Paul Mooney, I, too, stopped waiting for someone to come "find" me lol.

The final example in this set involves a discussion on the difference between race and ethnicity and the societal lack of understanding that Latinos may be of any race, including black:

So True! My parents are both Latino. My parents always told my siblings and I that we are black, despite what other african-americans might say about us because to the world are large, we are black. While we are multi-racial, I identify as black or african-american. I embrace my heritage but my mother always told me that she was a black woman first, then latina, much like Tego Calderon says he's black man first before everything else. [big grin]

Kinks shared their general observations of and experiences with white people 61 times in the data. In this first example, a commenter expresses shock

upon learning that a North Carolina state employee who was fired from his job for refusing to lower his facility's flag in honor of late Senator Jesse Helms was white:

Oh wow, he's a white guy. Props for him for following his convictions and not honoring that racist so and so.

In this reference, a Kink shares how her experience in watching an episode of CNN's *Black in America* series was affected by viewing it with her white friend:

Someone had posted some pages ago [laugh] that the target audience is not really black people (or is only partially for black people). Watching it confirmed that. I didn't learn anything new. It wasn't insightful to me, but I was watching it with my white friend, and she kept saying "what!! Really I had no idea." Discussing it with her, made the program more interesting.

This example is drawn from a thread which centered on gentrification and the experiences and attitudes of white people in transitioning neighborhoods. Its author is responding to a post which suggested that white residents who belong to the same class as the existing residents have fewer issues than do those who are part of the gentrification process:

Excellent point! What of the White residents who were born and raised in these neighborhoods? I don't particularly hear them talking about being targeted for violent behavior or ostracized for not looking like the majority. I think the issue has a lot more to do with

class than race. I'm a bit conflicted. On one hand, it seems like a form of "victim blame" to insinuate that getting robbed or assaulted is a consequence of not being cordial to your neighbors. On the other hand, I think people can pick up on a "UGH, I can't wait until I graduate/get a better job so I can get out of this hellhole and into REAL civilization!" attitude if that's what you're projecting (like some of the people Daddy's Girl has encountered in Bushwick). It's insulting to the "locals" and fosters a separatist attitude.

The following post grew out of a tribute thread to Esmin Green, whose 2008 death on the floor of a Brooklyn, NY hospital was attributed to a breakdown of the US healthcare system. In it, a Kink asserts that some whites are also at risk of neglect by health providers:

Exactly. This is a problem of society. It's easy to say it's a haves vs. have-nots issue. To some degree it is, but that lack of care happens on the white side of town too.

A Kink makes a general observation of something she perceives as being primarily "for whites" during her reply to a new member who has expressed frustration that her natural hair does not blow in the wind:

@bolded part,[shocker] Really? wow. [surprise] Um..I'm not trying to be pessimistic but I don't think hair blowing in the wind is a feature of nappy hair. That's more for whites. You should be glad that you atleast have hair to cover your head, bc if you didn't your

head would be cold with the wind hits it. [roll eyes]) I dunno, I tried to find humor in that but I **really** hope you begin to see what's special about your napz.))[unsure]

In addition to their discussion of white people in general, Kinks also used their talk to compare and contrast themselves to white women, in particular. Their comments, like those in the examples below, show that Kinks had an awareness of the ways in which white women move through the world differently than they do. The first post from “Hair is to black women what weight is to white women: Thoughts on this video?,” a thread discussion concerning a CNN.com video. The commenter explores the different ways that black and white women are constrained by appearance:

White women dont have the SAME hair issues we do. But you wont be sexy unless your skinny/slender, not too much thigh and hip action going on. They can go out with a short short limp hair and be skinny be "sexy and edgy". If you are overweight and have long swingin hair then you are still just fat. In the black community, a black woman who is really thin and has short short limp hair may fall victim to the "bald or Chicken head" comments. And a overweight black woman will get tons of attention if she wears her real hair long

In this case, taken from a conversation on a member's interactions with a white coworker who calls her “Aunt Jemima”, a Kink warns that white women

sometimes purposely manipulate others into further marginalizing black women:

Wow, her lips are way too loose in the workplace [huh?] I do have a question for yall though, I often see people say "go to HR" when they feel insulted on the job, but I was always under the impression that going to HR should be carefully considered because doing so can make your life on the job hell and/or nix your chances at promotions. Am I wrong? **I think you should first approach the woman and see where her head is at, some white folks like to fall back on cluelessness when it comes to ignorant ways they react to those outside their culture. She could be the type who will feign innocence when the time comes and get everyone to see you as the angry black woman [roll eyes]**

Another Kink expresses regret that posting on the *Culture* forum is limited to subscribed members and she will therefore be unable to start a thread on Feminism vs. Womanism (or her other interest, Asian men and Black women dating):

Heh. true. I wanted to create an entire site dedicated to Asian men and Black women dating. But that's because of the VH1 thing pissing me off. [tongue]. We wouldn't be able to do that in the free threads. Unfortunately no funds for cultural thread yet. I really wanted to discuss a paper I'm writing on *Feminism vs. Womanism*

*during the 2008 Political Primaries.* Ah well...maybe some other time.

Finally, a commenter highlights the differences she perceives between the way the media treats a white woman who complains about the status quo and a black woman who behaves in the same way, using it to illustrate how the sociopolitical voice of black women is limited:

Seriously, ITA. Every time a black person wants to call America on its bullshit, people get all up in arms. This country was built on the backs of slave labor and the torture and humiliation of Native Americans. But like I said, give a white feminist a platform and she'll sing like a bird. The media will sit back and say "Aw, isn't that cute. She's on her little soapbox". They call America on all kinds of stuff but I've never once heard them be referred to as unpatriotic. Let Michelle Obama get up and start talking about the atrocities that this country has committed against blacks and she's bitter, angry, and unpatriotic.

In 15 instances, Kinks used their platform to examine the effects that sexism has on them as black women. They discussed perceived sexist behavior from both inside and outside the black community. Six examples of this type of exploration follow. The commenter in the first example, from the Esmin Green tribute thread, makes an impassioned call for action for Kinks and others like them to step up to speak for women like Green and other women of color:

The question becomes, who speaks for this woman? Who will stand for her and all WOC like her? Well, logically, it would fall to people like a lot of those who post here. People who have free time, and consider themselves conscious. We could make time, give of ourselves and our resources, and try to address the root problems that had Esmin in the situation that she was in.

A critique of a hip-hop artist's claim that he does not date "dark butts," black women with recognizably African features, sparked the post in the next example. While several of her peers brushed off the remarks, others took aim at the broader implications of his perspective (emphasis in original):

This is why it doesn't work for me to say "oh this type of thing doesn't bother me" because it's message #5,948,032 that YOUNG sistas get about why they aren't good enough, less than, not as good as, hoes, chickenheads, this that the other and it's quite quite obvious that **sistas do NOT feel good about themselves** on the whole at all. It doesn't bother *me* whether or not he likes me, but it does bother me that he would say that. Our people still have deep issues, denial notwithstanding.

The next post appeared in a thread discussion of an article written by a black man who claims that the aesthetic choices of black women are partially to blame for the lack of a "revolution" in the black community:

I do me and the weave sisters can just do them too. Although I do get mad that Koreans are profiting off our self-hate, if Black folk didn't want it, they wouldn't buy it. Business speaks louder than words. So it's practically a done deal kind of thing. But I didn't know the author was male-I had my suspicions. I'm weary of men talking down to women on such things.

And this post is in response to a YouTube video made by a black male about his general impressions of black women:

On another note, Dude is straight up nutz though. Pretty much 80% of his videos are about bashing Black Women so yeah; some black woman or a series of black women have turned his world inside-the-ckuf-out. ....and boy is he heated about it!!! [huh] he's got over 400-some-odd videos bashing the hell outta BW. Ah well!

Two discussions on black male privilege and its impact on black women provided the next two examples. First, a Kink draws upon the writings of Pearl Cleage to support her assertion that the black community fails to acknowledge or confront sexism the way it does racism, to the detriment of black women:

Pearl Cleage said something interesting about privilege and sexism back in the 80s. "But in trying to talk to black men about sexism (or to understand it more clearly ourselves) our racial history is an invaluable tool. Black men who have experienced racism are already familiar with what oppression looks like, how it operates,



how it can permeate and poison every area of your life. The problem is, we have not figured out a way to use that racial knowledge to help them understand sexism and their role in it" (*Deals With the Devil: And Other Reasons to Riot*, 28-29). I agree with that. We as Black people know all about racism, but we are very reluctant to discuss gender issues and sexism. Much of the racism that many of us experience is institutional just like sexism, yet we rarely acknowledge it like that. In reality, both of those isms are about privilege and power. We "get" racism but it's so mystifying to me that that understanding of race rarely translates into gender.

And another woman recalls an experience which informed her perspective on privilege and power for a discussion of an blog article on black male privilege:

I just left a conference where I had an intense discussion with a white woman who is a "white privledge" scholar....again, she was very candid about how white privledge, born out of white supremacy and dominanation, benifited her while harming non-whites...You really can't make someone see that unless they are ready to see that...imo, the author was trying to make a "black" version of the male privledge checklist (which comes from a white privledge checklist, btw) because so many black men cannot step outside their black disadvantage to see their male advantage...we

could pull up all sorts of data, personal experiences, research studies, and other examples to support the point that black men are advantaged, in particular ways, over women, as a result of male domination, which is just as wrong as white domination...but unless one is open to examining how this plays out in their own lives, it won't convince them...just like so many white people are not convinced that white privilege exists...

### **Analysis**

Kinks clearly know BE/AAVE, but do not use it extensively on the site. None of the 1,593 total posts in the data set were written solely in informal BE. Instead, when the women used informal BE, they preferred to blend it with SE to create a hybrid form of black women's talk referred to in the study as formal BE. Formal BE is a form of code-switching, and Kinks used this skill in two main ways. The first method was an actual strong shift between two linguistic styles (e.g. from BE to SE and back again). This shift was usually marked to indicate that the decision to display their bidialectic talents was intentional, often by physically separating the informal BE portion of comments in some explicit way (e.g. quotation marks, parentheses, laughter, etc.). The other way Kinks code-switched was more subtle. In these cases, the women followed SE style but coded their language by folding in black cultural references (e.g. quotes from black television shows and movies, lyrics to songs by black artists, taglines to products marketed to the black community, etc.) or oral traditions (e.g. repetition,

rhyiming, calls to action, etc.) into their posts. This type of message is “expert insider information” which is received by the intended audience but may seem neutral or unimportant to the uninitiated.

Formal BE was employed in an average of 1 in 6 posts, or approximately 17% of communicative opportunities. This is an important point because it means that stylistically the remaining 83% of Kinks informal communication was in SE. Even when speaking with other black women, it seems that Kinks’ default linguistic style is Standard English. Scott (2002) states that:

It is important to note that proficiency in Standard English has long been considered an important mark of credibility as often demonstrated during slavery when freed Blacks offered linguistic competency as proof of status. Such markers still exist today...a switch in language style or code does not presume a Black woman is incompetent in Standard English but rather, in the course of everyday talk, may choose not to speak Standard English as a means of marking and asserting identity across cultural worlds (p. 58).

Demographic data is not collected on the site, the registration form does not ask for educational or socioeconomic descriptors, and at no time during the researcher’s membership was this information requested. However, one could theorize based on the fact that Kinks are a self-selected group of black women who have chosen to wear their hair naturally. Black women who make this choice

must be equipped weather the social, professional, and financial storm that can come with wearing such highly politicized hair (Onwuachi-Willig, 2010; Rosette & Dumas, 2007) and BE/AAVE use, at least its public performance, decreases as socioeconomic status increases (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Scott, 2002). It is therefore possible that Kinks.com may draw its membership from black women with higher educational attainment levels and/or socioeconomic status, making a low incidence of informal BE-only communication more or less anticipated on the site. Moreover, if as Scott (2002) suggests, black women may be more likely to switch to BE when asserting identity across cultural worlds, the need to do so may become less pressing when one is ensconced safely in a more monocultural space. Language, in this case BE, is often used to demand social visibility, to remind oneself and others of one's "true" self in the face of threats to that self. Perhaps Kinks feel free to speak however they want to on the site and to explore the full range of what it means to *talk like a black woman*, even if that ends up being SE. This may also help to understand the scarce use of word *look* as a cultural boundary marker on the site. Kinks used the word in this way only twice, and once one in a direct exchange with another Kink on the site. If Kinks share a clear sense of where the boundaries lie, and one would argue that they must since the cultural identity of the site is so well-enforced, it may be that opportunities for line-crossing on a personal level are few.

In any case, Kinks are not very concerned with dissecting the particulars of what it means to talk like a black woman, devoting only 0.1% of their posts to discussion on the matter. Of these, all poked outright fun at society's denigration of black speech (e.g. "I kept asking myself what "sounding black" meant. Does that mean you can't conjugate a verb? Does that mean you only finished the third grade? Does that mean you have a NJ or GA accent?") and Hollywood-style "old-timey black talk" (i.e. "I can deal with that fact without being upset about it, **or assigning some past historical "poor me, i be black wit dis hair"** whine to the conversation"). Whether the absence of any substantive discussion on black women's talk says something important about how Kinks perceive their communication is unclear. It could mean that the topic of "what it means to talk like a black woman" holds little interest for the women on the site or it could be that black women are unlikely to consciously deconstruct their talk unless someone asks them to (e.g. Scott, 2002 and Houston, 2004).

Although the data may show scant evidence of Kinks' interest in the significance and characteristics of their talk, it reveals many of its applications. Being a black woman and member of the larger black community is important on the site, which is reflected in the fact that 1 in every 3 posts contained a Kinks reference to black solidarity and identity. Combined with instances of black woman's talk, that number rises to 1 in 2 posts with a reference to some facet of black identity.

Like the black women in Scott's (2002) study who used their everyday talk

to “mark solidarity with other black women who they perceive as sharing that same identity *and* an understanding of that identity” (p. 64), Kinks used black women’s talk as a kind of research tool, collecting evidence of their commonalities with other black women and exploring the spaces where different perspectives of black womanhood collide, sometimes arguing over what it means to be “really” black, never reaching consensus. They used it to reprimand and to cajole, to shun and to welcome. They used it as a litmus test, checking to see if another Kink “got” it. Sister,” “girl,” and similar words that emphasized in-group status were used in 1 in 4 posts with an identity and solidarity reference.

While Kinks committed much attention to discussions of black solidarity and issues in the black community, they privileged forward-looking, proactive discussions and dedicated a very small proportion of their communicative activity to racism and other external issues, mentioning racism in only 3% of posts and white people in 4%. From this perspective, Kinks appear to be Afrocentric in more ways than hair, the bulk of their conversations about how it is to move through the world as a black person kept black people firmly at the center. That final point, the role blackness plays on Kinks.com, is explored in the next section.

#### **Research question IV. In what ways is Kinks.com a distinctively black women’s online learning community?**

*ok well is it time to celebrate? can we roll the bbq grills and spiked watermelons back out, cus ain't no e-party like an Kinks party [laugh] \*Mixing up my Ghetto Juice and some potato and beet salad\* (Hair)*

We learned in Chapter 5 that Kinks.com is a dynamic distributed online

learning community of culture informed by additional features of mission, control and commercialism. The first section of this chapter revealed that Kinks.com is also a place where *black woman's talk* plays a key role in the collaboration that takes place there. The fourth and final research question investigates whether these two facts are interrelated: Is Kinks.com a distinctly black women's online learning community?

### **Black women and the internet**

First, *black women online* posts were reviewed for references to two things: being a black woman online and building online relationships. The data revealed no statements about how Kinks perceived life at the intersection of race and gender online, including how they approached the anonymity aspect of the internet and how they believed they are treated online because they are black women.

### **Perception of Kinks.com as a uniquely black space**

When measured by the standards of scaffolding and engaging that take place in collaborative learning, Kinks.com is a very "warm" place. This appears to be connected to the realities of life as a black woman. Black women are routinely and negatively stereotyped as morally loose, controlling, without feelings, unfeminine etc. (Bell, 2004; Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Morris, 2007; Reid-Brinkley, 2008; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010); further, they must face Eurocentric standards of beauty that place Africanized features at the bottom of the hierarchy (Golden, 2004; Hill,

2002; Neal, 1989; Seltzer, 1991). A large part of Kinks.com's value lies in its role as a uniquely black women's space where such obstacles are challenged in an identity-affirming way.

There were 52 references to the perceived worth of Kinks.com and/or the perception of the site as a uniquely black space, a number that is similar to the instances in which Kinks shared solutions while collaborating in knowledge building, used the word "girl" or "sister" to show solidarity, or spoke about racism, sexism, and white people. Kinks.com offers itself primarily as a haircare site for black women to learn to take care of their natural hair, a function it appears to perform well:

- I was natural for six years, I returned to rela.xe.r for 2.5 and now I am natural again. The major reason I went back to the creamy crack was because I was tired of wearing DST<sup>57</sup>. If I had this website then, I am sure I would of never gone back. At this site I've found so many options for our hair.
- Well, in the past year I have been much more careful about the products I use... and I've given myself more regular trims and given up blowdrying (my only previous form of heat). My hair is retaining length much more and feels softer than it ever has. I have more versatility and I get compliments on its health all the time. [big grin]  
All that to say: Thanks Kinks. You've been great to me. I promise to

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<sup>57</sup> DST=double strand twists



subscribe soon...

- Kinks has taught me how to take care of my hair, that there are more to hair products than grease and vaseline, and to appreciate the beauty and versatility of natural hair. I decided to go natural before I found Kinks and already had a support system in place, but this site gave me another perspective. I also became a product junkie and bought all kinds of products to try on my hair, some worked some didn't. Without Kinks, I probably never would have realized that so many women are natural and the struggles that can go along with it, but also the sense of accomplishment that you get when you learn what your hair needs to thrive.
- Since I've been on the site, I've gotten a lot of information on how to care for, maintain, STYLE and love my locs. The ladies and the fellas have really helped me get through some extremely rough beginning days of my journey when I didn't know WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN!! [tongue] I love Kinks and it was a blessing to be able to have this site available for me when I was ready to, literally, go back to my roots. [love]
- If it wasn't for kinks.com I don't know if I would have gotten the inspiration to go natural. I am so very grateful to Teena, her website and the ladies that swap and share info here. Plus all the ladies that keep a fotki, they were wonderful in assisting me to find a simple

regimen that works for me [smile].

For many members, Kinks.com is also a respite from a world where it can be difficult to be a black woman, a space where they are understood and accepted:

- Another thing I do is to post affirmations on my wall (pictures, poems, scripture) and remind myself of how lovely I am the way God made me because no body else will tell you (except on Kinks.com of course [big grin].) Personally, I found that when you don't have an outlet, then you are more prone to getting angry and snapping back at everyone which is not healthy.
- I so, SO, appreciate all of your support. That is why I LOVE this site and consider it a Godsend for natural sisters all over the world.
- We all know this, but for some it might actually be hard to believe when it happens and when it does, it sucks and your spirit has been broken and you look for some love from the only ladies that will ever understand....Kinks nappies
- Kinks has shown me that there are women all over the world who are rocking their beautiful hair just the way God intended to. It's hard to stay natural and positive when you have so many weaved-up, p.ermed-up women around you. It's nice to coem to Kinks to see women that look like you. Kinks has also taught me about using household products for my hair. Baking soda rinses are the

jam.

- Thank you so much guys!! I really needed to hear all of that from you guys! That's why I [love] this site! You all pick me up when I feel down! Thanks a bunch!! [big grin]
- It's like pulling teeth! I swear. I stopped doing it too. I can't really talk hair with anyone who isn't on Kinks.com or already KinkThink! They just don't get it, and I hate wasting my breath. I get so frustrated, so I gave it up - quick like!

Fictive kin plays a vital role in black culture and the extended family, bound by blood, law or simply heartstrings, is a much-tapped resource for survival and resilience (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994; Johnson, 1999; Stewart, 2007). Accordingly, Kinks perceived Kinks.com as a “family”:

- Thanks for letting me vent family.
- Hello Family! I made a video on combining interlocs, nappylocs, sisterlocs. [link]
- Thanks so much - I can always count on my Kinks family! [love]
- I have to acknowledge the Kinks family without whom I am convinced that this part of my journey would have been extremely uninformed and lonely.
- CONGRATS AND WELCOME TO THE FAMILY!!!

More importantly, they also perceived it as a black (i.e. nappy) family:

- With that said thank you **napp fam** for keeping me motivated.

- Congrats and see you in nappy land...PS...**our nappy family** is a great source of encouragement and are great resources.

And as suggested by others (Kennedy, 2004; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Wilson & Peterson, 2002), Kinks have formed a relationship with the site which is very much connected to their “real” lives. In fact, one of the main Kinks.com discussion boards is dedicated to members’ ongoing efforts to socialize with one another off-line:

- SOUTH CAROLINA naturals are planning a meet up in Upstate, SC On May 22 at Cleveland Park (Greenville, SC). please contact me for more information. My email address is [email] Festivities begin at 2PM-9 PM We have reserved the shelter til 9 PM, activities may end sooner, come early! Come meet other naturals in the state.
- Hey Detroit metro area/Michigan nappies, Irie and I invite you to an upscale (but very reasonably priced) night of fabulous food, good wine and fun people: Two events, one night in downtown Detroit's Harmonie Park. The events are across the street from each other! and there is garage, street and valet parking.
- This is now the official thread for the Kinks cruise. We will be leaving from Miami on Saturday [date] on Carnival Cruise's IMAGINATION. This is a 5 day cruise. We will return on Thursday [date]. Our destinations are Grand Cayman Island and Ocho Rios, Jamaica.

## Analysis

The complete absence of direct references to how Kinks thought about being both black women online was disappointing, as the researcher hoped that any Kinks statements to this effect could be compared to the feedback Knadler (2001) received from the black women in his computer-mediated composition course. While Kinks' reluctance to deconstruct their experiences as black women on the internet beyond the "walls" of Kinks.com *may* share roots with their similar hesitation to engage in reflective learning collaboration, this explanation seems unlikely. Rather, this situation appears to have more in common with the group's lack of introspective activity surrounding their own talk. This should not be taken to suggest that Kinks are not curious about the particulars of black women's talk or with those in connection with the ways that being a black woman impact one's internet "citizenship". Instead, it may more accurately be seen as a lack of opportunity. The data shows that Kinks are quite interested in talking about facets of black womanhood, so there may be a straightforward explanation: perhaps they did not talk about their talk or about being a black woman online simply because no one asked.

Despite their reluctance to make explicit statements about their experiences at on the internet, Kinks clearly hold attitudes similar to the composition students in Knadler's (2001) composition class. Like those women, Kinks rejected invisibility and instead embraced the medium as a means to connect with other black women. This is revealed in their eagerness to declare

Kinks.com as a uniquely black woman's space and to make it as "warm" and safe as possible for black womanhood. It is reflected in their efforts to create an aura of "family" and to break the wall between virtual and physical reality by staging get-togethers and vacations with other Kinks in the "real" world.

## **Conclusion**

The first section of this chapter explored which characteristics of black women's talk were present in learning collaboration on Kinks.com. The data revealed that while Kinks certainly know BE/AAVE and employ some version of it in roughly 1 in 6 posts, they overwhelmingly chose to use Standard English as their default mode of communication. It is theorized that a combination of demographic and social realities (i.e. middle class blacks are less likely to use BE publicly and middle class black women are more likely to go natural) contribute. Additionally, Kinks may be less pressed to assert cultural identity through BE because cultural "border crossings" are less necessary on the site and there are fewer opportunities for cultural misunderstandings.

The second section shows that while Kinks did not have explicit discussions about being a black woman online, they revealed attitudes and behaviors that made it clear that they valued Kinks.com as much for its learning opportunities as for its cultural ones, making no effort to separate the two. Like Knadler's (2001) composition students, Kinks did not embrace anonymity; instead, they embraced each other by building meaningful, familial relationships with other black women in a virtual setting and sought ways to enrich their off-line

lives through their on-line experiences.

Chapters 5 and 6 examined the learning and culture that is observed on Kinks.com in fairly separate terms. The next chapter investigates the intersection of the two, based on additional findings that emerged during data analysis process.

## CHAPTER 7

### WHO SAID IT WAS SIMPLE?<sup>58</sup>

*Developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeably skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping, and giving meaning to the latter, which it subsumes (Lave, 1991, p. 65).*

#### Introduction

The initial aim of this study was to investigate two aspects of Kinks.com: its status as a learning community and its existence as a distinctly black cultural space. While the data revealed that the site is in fact a dynamic distributed learning community of black women's culture, one that shares key characteristics with its formal learning community counterparts, the data also revealed a persistent thread of a particular type of identity generation which sets the site apart from traditional learning environments.

Lave and Wenger (1991) hold that becoming a full member of a knowledge community is a transformative experience and that LPP is the process by which this transformation occurs. From this perspective, knowledge is mutually constructed through a constant give and take between people and activity, information and identity. For example, achieving adulthood is a process of legitimate peripheral participation. Moving from "I am a child" to "I am an adult" is as much a function of taking on a new identity as it is one of taking on new skills. Legally, adulthood may be a marker of time (i.e. eighteen years of age) but it is the internalized perception of what adults do and know and how they act and

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<sup>58</sup> Poem by Audre Lorde; full text in Appendix A



think that determines if and when a person identifies themselves as a “real” adult (Kenyon, Rankin, Koerner, & Dennison, 2007; Nelson & Barry, 2005).

The data suggested that “true” Kinkhood may be similar to “true” adulthood, with full membership dependent on an ongoing modification of one’s performance *and* self-perception. This chapter explores the efforts toward the development and maintenance of a specific group identity on Kinks.com as well as its connection to learning through a description of KinkThink through a lens of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP).

### **KinkThink<sup>59</sup>**

Members may not be required to divulge key demographic information (e.g. age, race, location, income, education level, etc.) during the registration process, but the data suggest what kind of woman is likely most attracted to the site. Because Kinks.com is a community for and by black women who are interested in natural hair, she is first and foremost presumed to be a black woman who is currently wearing her hair in its natural state or is headed in that direction. Further, she is middle-class or higher or at least aspires to become or to be seen as such. This aspiration to middle-class or higher status can be inferred from the fact that Standard English is used almost exclusively on Kinks.com and public use of BE/AAVE is known to decrease as socioeconomic status increases (Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Scott, 2002). Moreover, wearing natural hair is often fraught with sociopolitical pressures (e.g. the threat of firing)

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<sup>59</sup> Term chosen by author

which require enough financial and social security to withstand them (Onwuachi-Willig, 2010; Rosette & Dumas, 2001). In addition, computer ownership, internet connectivity, hair treatments and tools, styling practices that require several hours, high post counts, etc. all presuppose at least moderate amounts of disposable income and/or time. Finally, the prototypical Kink is also likely to be an urbanite in a large city with a sizable black population because although the popularity of natural hair has increased in recent years (Burton, 2010; Hale, personal communication, February 7, 2011), there are more resources and a more extensive face-to-face support network (e.g. products, learning opportunities, stylists, and salons) in metropolitan areas with large black populations because the demand for them is higher (Hale, personal communication, February 7, 2011). Hale, who has owned and operated *Everette's Natural Beauty Salon & School* in Detroit since 1978, explains, "A lot of black women in small towns likely would go natural but the numbers just aren't there. People always ask me why I don't come down to [small city] but I tell them that stylists can't make enough money in those areas. It's not that [these women] don't want to wear natural hair, it's more because they don't have the support for that."

Being (or being able to present oneself as) a middle-class, urban black woman with natural hair forms only the basic foundation for Kink identity. Kinks.com is a very controlled environment, and it is the justification, application, and integration of this control (i.e. KinkThink) which determines whether a

member becomes a *real* Kink. The data provides a view of KinkThink, which can be broken down into three main components: *mental conversion*, *activism*, and *compliance*. A fourth component, *tension*, will also be discussed. The example of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) from Lave (1991) suggests a template for legitimate peripheral participation on Kinks.com. In AA, practicing alcoholics are not only learning the hands-on steps of recovery from alcoholism. Full participation in AA hinges upon one's ability to successfully come to view oneself as an ex-drinker. Likewise, in order to gain full access to the knowledge that Kinks.com has to offer, members must learn how to *be natural* in the way that the site has defined it.

#### *Mental conversion*

The mental transformation that forms the cornerstone of KinkThink is clearly modeled after Teena's own. For her, new information developed alongside a new identity:

[W]hen I first stopped relaxing my hair it wasn't done out of some sudden sense of pride and desire to go natural. It was done because I had a "chemical crew cut". A relaxer had broken my hair off. As a person who revelled in having long, straight hair (my own) I was devastated. Unable to wear my hair short, I first went to wigs, then extensions and weave, in an attempt to preserve what I thought made me beautiful.

About 6 months into my "transition" - though I didn't know what it was - I began to question my hair - and myself. Having worked in corporate banking and finance before moving into the film and music industries, I remembered the pressure I had been under to maintain my hair in a \*certain\* way when employed by a Fortune 100 company.

It wasn't so much an obvious **RULE** that said I had to straighten it, but no where around me, not a single Black woman had her hair in any style other than relaxed or straightened. There were no natural styles anywhere to be seen in the corporate environment. Not so much as a hint of new growth.

*Why? Why could other races wear their hair the way it grew out of their heads and we couldn't? Why the double standard for us? What was wrong with my natural hair? What was that feeling when the new growth appeared? It was inferiority.*

When I realized that and faced it, it was like someone dropped a rock on my head and I knew it was the awful truth. So I dealt with it.

As my hair grew, so did my determination NOT to **EVER** straighten it again.

That Kinks often refer to chemical relaxers in terms of addiction is no coincidence. KinkThink, the mental transformation required for true Kinkdom, is very much presented as a recovery process, a constant battle against one's

demons, in this case dominant beauty standards that threaten to drag them back into self-hatred and self-abuse if they are not careful. Kinks who lapse in their vigilance make self-conscious confessions of “falling off the wagon” or “having a relapse.” They log on to garner support to get them through rough patches and seek new acquaintances and routines away from those who still “use”. Indeed, this excerpt from the introduction to “Is A.A. Right For You?” would seamlessly match the tone and content of Kinks.com with very slight modification:

[Original] We who are in A.A. came because we finally gave up trying to control our drinking. We still hated to admit that we could never drink safely. Then we heard from other A.A. members that we were sick. (We thought so for years!) We found out that many people suffered from the same feelings of guilt and loneliness and hopelessness that we did. We found out that we had these feelings because we had the disease of alcoholism.

[Hypothetical Kinks version] We who are on Kinks.com came because we finally gave up trying to control our hair. We still hated to admit that we could never straighten safely. Then we heard from other Kinks.com members that we were sick. (We thought so for years!) We found out that many people suffered from the same feelings of guilt and loneliness and hopelessness that we did. We found out that we had these feelings because we had the disease of creamy crack addiction.

When one's new self-image rests upon being natural and "conscious," any setback can cause an identity crisis. Nasir & Hand (2008) refer to a connection like this, wherein a person's identity is tied to participation in specific social or cultural activity as a practice-linked identity, which is "more than just membership or belonging...[it] extends beyond learning (though learning is certainly critical) to the very definition of who one is and who one is in the process of becoming through participation" (p. 176). Kinks.com, which members perceive as a family, encourages this kind of intense commitment and identification. Although it is Teena's site and people (Teena included) are not shy about reiterating that fact, much effort is investing into encouraging members to value a collective identity. Kinks are continually reminded of who "we" are. Just as importantly, Kinks are not only defined by who they are (black women with natural hair and conscious minds) but also who they are not (white women or unconscious blacks). As Wenger (1998) explains:

We not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in. Our identities are constituted not only by what we are but also by what we are not. To the extent that we can come in contact with other ways of being, what we are not can even become a large part of how we define ourselves (p. 164).

### *Activism*

Teena claims that she and Kinks.com are on a mission to “save heads.” Therefore, the second major element of KinkThink is *activism*, taking up the charge on and off the site:

If you are still relaxing your hair you are welcome here, however be warned...We don't debate the wonders of relaxing and we don't talk about the benefits of chemical or heat straightening on Kinks because frankly, there aren't any benefits. Just be aware that those of us here who are kinky are committed to being kinky and spreading the word of KinkThink. **We don't like relaxers** [emphasis hers]. And we don't sugar coat that fact.

Rejecting the Eurocentric standard is framed as only part of the transformation required in this community. It is not enough for Kinks to realize that they are oppressed; they must actively take what they have learned on the site and use it to attack the system which conspires against them. Going natural, which is an act of resistance through celebrating scorned African traits, is part of a larger drive to affect change on a worldwide scale. Kinks speak of “preaching the nappy gospel” and one of the community's boards is dedicated to “Napptivism,” sociopolitical acts aimed at improving the health of the black diaspora. A fully participating Kink, much like an A.A. oldtimer on the 12<sup>th</sup> Step, is expected to fully

internalize the “black is beautiful” message and use it to empower herself and others in the world outside of Kinks.com.

### *Compliance*

As we have seen in earlier chapters, Kinks.com lays down the law and it does not waver; the rules are the rules and members are constantly reminded of the community’s expectations and the consequences of not measuring up to them. Reprimands are often given openly, in full view of one’s peers, and they are many times more likely to originate from the keyboard of a fellow Kink rather than of someone who has formally been charged with the task of keeping content on message. To that end, fully-integrated KinkThink requires a Kink to defend the group’s mission and character against all dissenters, fellow Kinks included. She must also strike a careful balance between being enough of a critical thinker to effectively deconstruct the origins and aims of Eurocentrism and independent enough to flout convention in regard to black women’s hair and at the same time uncomplainingly submit to site parameters that severely limit the topic, content and tone of her speech.

Compared to traditional learning environments like those described in Fahy (2003) and Fahy (2005), Kinks.com is a very warm place and much effort is expended on creating a supportive, familial atmosphere. Yet, it cannot be denied that this atmosphere is less than cozy to anyone who voices a minority opinion in the community (e.g. black women’s hair straightening is not rooted in self-hatred). The KinkThink identity demands sanctions be given to those members



who are too green or too stubborn to have fully assimilated enough to keep divergent viewpoints to themselves. (Imagine the reception someone who advocated social drinking would receive at an A.A. meeting!)

In earlier chapters, we saw several instances of interKink conflict stemming from a real or perceived slight against the community's principles. The scolded party often backed down, frequently attributing the breach to a lack of information or unfamiliarity with the board rules or culture. These cases usually blow over quickly. The harshest penalties appeared to be reserved for those members who refused to apologize for a difference of opinion or who pressed the issue (e.g. demanding an explanation for why the site places such constraints on the discussion that takes place there). These members were openly shouted down, threatened with banning, or dismissed, thereby comprising (or ending) their access to the site's knowledge funds.

### *Tensions*

KinkThink is plainly coercive, even as the community professes an anti-coercive stance in regard to Eurocentrism. Kinks are pressed to set themselves off from any outsider and openly correct insiders who do not follow convention. Conformity is bad unless you are conforming to KinkThink. This is frequently the rule rather than the exception when it comes to black women's social organizations; the threat of exclusion from one of the few spaces set up as "safe" for them is often enough to motivate these women to submit to whatever limits are set as a condition of entry and acceptance (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). Being a

black woman isn't enough, you must be the "right" kind of black woman to be fully accepted on Kinks.com and, if you are not, you may find yourself on the outside looking in. This outlook is clear in this excerpt of Teena's response to comments about the site's reputation as being cultish and narrow-minded:

I don't care what people think. If they can't hack it here, or hang with the TRULY KINKTHINK chicks, then go elsewhere. Sure, I'm a hardass, but someone has to be. There are plenty of other places where you can talk about anything you want. Kinks isn't one of 'em. Kinks isn't for everyone and I'm not interested in popularity. I'm interested in keeping true to our mission, saving heads and nothing else.

Wenger (2000, p. 229) argues that communities of practice, those spaces where identity and learning interlace and grow together, define competence in three ways: joint enterprise, mutuality, and shared repertoire. Kinks have a common cause (joint enterprise)—the physical, mental and behavioral goals of KinkThink, and judge each other on the level of understanding and contribution toward that end. They have strong group norms and interpersonal relationships, reflecting mutuality. Finally, they have shared resources and rituals. In this way, the learning that occurs on Kinks.com is both a function of and motivation for the Kink identity. However, this identity and the insider/outsider divide it can create can cause these organizations to become "hostage to their history, insular, defensive, closed in, and oriented to their own focus" (Wenger, 2000, p. 233), a charge that is frequently leveled at Kinks.com. The relatively impermeable border

likely has much to do with KinkThink's war on (at least) two fronts (i.e. in opposition with whites and non-likeminded blacks). Still, Kinks.com has earned a reputation in some circles as a "cult" due to their strict adherence to Teena's "hardass" vision and often less than charitable treatment of dissenting viewpoints.

## **Conclusion**

In the course of data analysis for the central questions of this study involving Kinks.com's potential as a learning community and as a culturally black environment, issues of identity development and maintenance were uncovered. KinkThink, the concept of what a "good" Kink should be and do, reveals that the ideal Kink is one who internalizes the specific Kinks.com expectations of mental conversion, activism, and compliance, finding a balance between thinking critically about oppression on a global scale but submitting to a form of it on a local one. With limited opportunities to learn natural haircare, some members may perceive the site's social and learning benefits to outweigh the costs. You must be the "right" kind of Kink, defined as taking on the mental conversion, active participation, and compliance aspects of the KinkThink, to take full advantage of the social and knowledge-building benefits of the site. The women who do well, who become "real" Kinks with all of the social and learning perks therein (e.g. becoming a moderator) are those who have undergone a process of legitimate peripheral participation, fully internalizing KinkThink or learning to convincingly present themselves as having done so.

Kinks.com's status as a dynamic distributed learning community of black women's culture is enhanced by the intertwined relationship between identity-generation and knowledge-generation on the site. Situated learning holds that learning and identity are both causes and consequences of each other. The sites in which this type of relationship thrives can be a source for change but can also be a place where the insider/outsider boundary is stiff enough to stifle creativity and open exchange of ideas, a situation with which Kinks.com often struggles. The Kink identity is a narrow one, with no room (inside it) for any outside opinions that critique it, so while there is much knowledge and culture and support to be had on Kinks.com, it is conditional.

The broader implications of the Kinks.com study as well as suggestions for future research are discussed in Chapter 8.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **DROPPIN' KNOWLEDGE**

*"Listen up," the old heads would demand before launching into yet another long-winded story, "I'm about to drop some knowledge on ya. 'Bout to tell you the real real." We would snicker, sigh and roll our eyes melodramatically, but we would listen; because we knew that the tale we were about to hear would be as entertaining as it was informative.*

This dissertation attempts to place Kinks.com, an online community for black women, within a broader context of collaborative learning. The original research questions concerned whether the community could fairly be called an online learning community as well as whether the site's members and audience (i.e. black women) impacted the interaction that occurred there. Additional research questions on the evidence of a specific Kink identity were added as a result of preliminary data analysis.

The data reveals that Kinks.com is a learning space that was designed by black women for black women to encourage and support black women to wear their hair naturally. Because black women's features have long been placed in opposition to the dominant beauty ideal, their hairstyle (typically the feature that diverges most from the Eurocentric normative standard) becomes a marker of racial and gender identity. Wearing natural hair then becomes a loaded choice that comparatively few black women make. Due to the lack of widespread resources for natural haircare, many of these black women must turn to the internet for the social and technical support needed to even consider this choice.

The online learning collaboration that takes place on the site does so in an

environment that is flavored with references to black womanhood and black women's talk. Kinks put great effort into personalizing the environment and supporting each other through an often difficult learning and transition process. However, the warmth and support is balanced by exceptionally strict group norms that require firm adherence to a very narrow black, female, and natural cultural identity that is both determined and policed by the private owner of the site and those whom she appoints as proxies. To fully access the knowledge that is available on the site, Kinks must come to internalize the ideology and traditions of the Kinks cultural space in an act of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), an aspect of situated learning.

Kinks.com commitment to being known as a place for black women is unambiguous. In Chapter 4, we saw that from the moment an internet browser opens the window to the homepage, Kinks.com's intended audience is unmistakable. The very first thing the site does is announce to visitors that they have arrived at a "Black African American Natural Hair Resource" and the community reiterates this in some way on every page: afro picks act as wallpaper, a kinky tress underlines the group's name, and site-generated images *only* feature black women. Further, the conversations that take place in the site's nucleus, its message boards, are overwhelming Afrocentric. Yet, Kinks.com is clearly a place for the "right" kind of black woman. KinkThink, assimilation of which is required for Kinks.com authenticity and full participation, hinges upon the site's philosophy of a specific type of mental conversion, activism, and

compliance. Neither all black women nor all natural women need stay.

Knadler (2001) suggests that the students in his class emphasized rather than downplayed their blackness when they learned with other black women online because: they “see themselves for the first time not as Other, not as different, not as token, but ‘normal’” (pg. 244). This could be key to understanding why the level of control on the site is so high. Taking a strong anti-straightening, anti-European beauty ideal stance is a revolutionary act in a world where a black woman can literally lose her job for choosing to wear a natural hairstyle (Onwuachi-Willig, 2010; Rosette & Dumas, 2007). Keeping the naysayers away may be a psychological defense more than anything else. Collins (1989) states: “Expressing an independent Black feminist consciousness is problematic precisely because more powerful groups have a vested interest in suppressing such thought” (p. 749). Kinks.com’s philosophy and mission are unquestioningly radical even in the black community because the Kink identity depends upon being in opposition to not only whites but also blacks who are deemed to still be stuck in “The Matrix.” If the very act of being “safe” for black women is an act of social resistance in a society that devalues every aspect of black womanhood, the community’s (hyper)vigilance may be perceived as necessary for self-preservation and psychic protection.

The presence of paid advertising also contributes to explicit rule enforcement. Kinks.com accepts keyword advertising from Google and other online marketers. When a specific word or phrase is typed on the site, it is

automatically made into a hyperlink to an ad for a product or service. Board filters attempt to ensure that no advertisements for goods and services that run counter to the Kinks.com's Afrocentric mission will be linked to the site via particular words (e.g. relaxer, perm, flatiron, etc.). This may explain the relative laxity of enforcement for members who "filter the filter" by amending taboo words with creative punctuation and/or spelling (e.g. re.laxer, p3rm, fl/atiron, etc.). If the primary goal is to avoid linking ads to specific words, it stands to reason that the Moderators would not be particularly concerned with circumvention tactics that ultimately work to achieve this goal.

Black women's talk also plays a role in the way that rules are communicated and enforced on Kinks.com. Houston (1994) found that black women value their talk for being candid and direct; passivity, which is used to describe white women's communication, is a perceived strength. Being "told" (i.e., dressed down) is par for the course on Kinks.com and does not appear to be taken particularly personally. This may also be due to the high level of compliance that the site demands of its members. Yet, speaking up and speaking out, when it pertains to how KinkThink is practiced in the community, is never welcome on Kinks.com.

Finally, that Teena is the sole owner of Kinks.com brings added dimension to the understanding of how norms are applied on the site. Unlike formalized learning communities and institutions, Kinks.com is held by a single individual who has the power to set the site's structure and mission according to her



personal tastes. KinkThink is clearly patterned after Teena's own identity transformation, which led her to create the site. Teena seldom posts and rarely "pulls rank" when she does. However, as the data repeatedly shows, it is unnecessary for her to intervene because Kinks are quite committed to doing so on her behalf and the rules are posted on every page. Kinks.com is perceived as Teena's "house" where she runs things. You do not have to agree with her rules, but you must respect them. If Kinks.com is a black family, Teena is positioned as its "Big Mama."

While black families are not monolithic and all do not place a family member in this role, traditionally a Big Mama is a nurturing and knowledgeable grandmother figure who dispenses hard-learned life lessons with love and unflinching bluntness to the point of (often unintended) hilarity. Examples abound: Movies starring producer/director/actor Tyler Perry's archetypal Big Mama character, Madea, helped him to reach #2 on the 2010 *Forbes* list of highest-earning men in Hollywood.<sup>60</sup> Recording artist LLCoolJ titled his 2002 single, "Big Mama (Unconditional Love)" and dedicated it to the grandmother who raised him; "Big Mama" an Oscar-winning 2000 documentary follows an elderly black grandmother's struggle to save her young grandson from the system; "Big Mama's Team of Life" is a Florida charity based on the civic and social activism of a local black woman; and a Google search for "Big Mama Soul Food" locates 272,000 references in 0.22 seconds. After actor and activist, Alfre Woodard,

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<sup>60</sup> Forbes.com. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/2010/09/15/hollywoods-top-earning-men-business-entertainment-top-earning-men.html>

mentioned her grandmother in passing, PBS host Tavis Smiley interjects in order to cajole her into telling a story about her:

You mention your big mama. And I'm just gonna--this has nothing to do with anything, but I'm just curious. Tell me, like, one of your favorite--tell me about your big mama. And I'm asking only because everybody has a big mama. And for the people who are watching who don't know who big mama is, it usually means somebody's grandmother--your grandmother on your mama's side, grandmother on your daddy's side. But your grandmother oftentimes in black families is called your big mama. Just tell me something about your--I'm fascinated by big mama stories.

Like a Big Mama, Teena bestows information based on life experience rather than professional training and expects her rules to be followed whether or not they make sense at the time. You may bite your lip or mumble your disagreement under your breath, but openly sharing your divergent views with Big Mama rarely ends well; you can disagree when you leave. As Teena asserts in her post above, "There are plenty of other places where you can talk about anything you want. Kinks isn't one of 'em." Family members work together to compel appropriate behavior, to ensure that everyone stays in line and respects their elder, especially in her house. In an example (first seen in Chapter 4), a Kink literally draws a parallel between respecting the site as you would a private home:

this is a moot point..y'all can do whatever you want to your hair as it's on your head. but the rules of the site are clearly stated, so who cares how healthy flat flaming hot tool of hair torture,ing or blow drying your hair can be? you can argue the greatness of the heat and hot hair all you want, but this is Teena's site and she's asked that we don't discuss it so why not be respectful? for real some of y'all are like people who come to my house and smoke when i clearly say no smoking and then are shocked that they can't smoke. yes rules apply to you and you are not the exception. if you feel the need to discuss the validities of it then fine, just do it on another site.

The assertion that members are free to “do [straightening talk] on another site” appears sincere, as evidenced by the number of Kinks who maintain an overt presence on sites that embrace straightened hair. During the course of this study, I observed that several high-status, well-liked, and active members (i.e. subscribed, high post count, long-term membership) were also on these other haircare sites. These women use their Kinks.com screennames and the same unstraightened hair photographs in their albums, together with additional shots of them with straight hair. Clearly, they are not trying to hide their presence on “rival” sites and no Kinks.com backlash was observed. Indeed, I saw no mention at all of their “double lives”. While this type of dual identity is clearly due in part to the cultural trope of respect (i.e., do what you want, but not here), it may also be

one of the ways in which this particular group of black women chooses to take advantage of the anonymity offered by the internet. In a “real” neighborhood or family, it would be difficult to escape sanctions for inappropriate attitudes or behavior. Although the community is a tightly bound one, Kinks remain strangers in tangible way, for example, there is no automatic way to know if the dreadlocked woman you passed on your way to work this morning was NaturalGal281. Unlike a mandatory Thanksgiving dinner at Big Mama’s, a Kink may walk away from the site at any time for any reason, without explanation and there is very little risk that someone will show up on her doorstep or shun her at church for it. Therefore, it is possible that there is no real penalty because there is no *real* penalty.

If the internet is like a massive city with many neighborhoods, and Kinks.com is Teena’s/Big Mama’s house, the learning interactions that occur there can be thought of as taking place in the kitchen, the historic breeding ground for black women’s creativity and opposition (Davis, 1999). Davis applies this concept to black women in the Academy; however, Kinks.com allows us to see the “kitchen” in action in a different realm. The black women on the site turned to each other to learn what they were not learning anywhere else. Further, they learned on their own terms and in ways that would be marginalized in conventional learning environments (e.g. black women’s talk, dedicating so much effort to warming their environment). In this way, Kinks.com may offer the field

some insight into how a group of black women on the other side of the classroom formulate their resistance to Eurocentric hegemony of knowledge-building.

Technology has already permeated every aspect of modern life and as the American educational experience reaches towards greater multiculturalism, it is ever more important to explore the relationship between technology, learning, and culture, especially as it concerns historically-marginalized groups. The Kinks study broadens a sociological perspective on education by providing information on how a group of people bind together to fill in the gaps left by mainstream education. Learning happens where it happens. Because black womanhood is so interwoven into the learning that occurs on Kinks.com, this study offers us a better understanding of how the concept of situated learning functions in a highly culturally-charged setting as well as a glimpse into how informal learning occurs over the lifetime. As Wenger (2006) asserts:

The school is not the privileged locus of learning. It is not a self-contained, closed world in which students acquire knowledge to be applied outside, but a part of a broader learning system. The class is not the primary learning event. It is life itself that is the main learning event. Schools, classrooms, and training sessions still have a role to play in this vision, but they have to be in the service of the learning that happens in the world.

### **Limitations of the study**

The greatest limitation of the study is the reality that Kinks.com shows only

the behaviors of a small, relatively homogenous group of black women. Although many different types of black women may come to Kinks.com's door, the ones who stay and are most active, those who eagerly internalize KinkThink or are savvy enough to convincingly fake it, are a very specific type, which makes it especially important to take care when making generalizations.

A second limitation was the nature of the internet itself. During my proposal defense, one of my committee members pointed out that there is no real way of knowing if people are who they say they are on the internet. Although I was a Kink long before I chose to formally research the site and thus had a level of familiarity and trust in connection with the community, this is a valid point.

It must also be said that Kinks.com is a site for women throughout the black diaspora, but draws the bulk of its membership from the United States and other Westernized culture, and likely, within the U.S., from middle or upper class urban black women. Therefore, the experiences and cultural interactions of the women on this site reflect only that reality.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Kinks.com lends itself to a wide range of topics in the broader field of education. There are too many options to list, but I offer four that fit with similar studies of the sociological aspects of education. One way to further contribute to the body of literature on black women and learning is to expand the current study to include first-person interviews with Kinks to compare and contrast the woman's learning experiences on Kinks.com with those in conventional online

learning settings. Another option is to conduct a case study which follows selected members posting activity from join date to the present, in order to gain more insight into how interactions in online learning communities of culture lead to learning outcomes over time. A third approach lies in exploring the potential racial identity development implications of integrating KinkThink culture. Finally, a fourth opportunity is a comparative study of learning on Kinks.com with that on similar sites for members of other marginalized groups.

### **A final note**

What first drew me to Kinks.com as a dissertation topic was the idea that some of the conversations Kinks engaged in reminded me of those I had had in my graduate coursework. Now that the study is finished, the question must be posed: Do I feel that was an accurate assessment? Somewhat. After reading hundreds of threads, I can say that there were indeed many Kinks.com discussions on social issues that would not be at all out of place on an online message board linked to a traditional graduate course with a sociopolitical flavor. From what I have gathered, many Kinks are graduate students (or will be or once were) and these women bring their training and intellect with them when they log on. Site discussions would invariably reflect that. (After all, we know at least one Ph.D. candidate visits the site regularly!) Of course, Kinks.com is not a graduate course; it is an informal learning environment that aims to build a particular identity along with a particular body of knowledge. What these conversations that I speak of bear out, is that Kinks.com is a context where formal and informal

education come together to create a space for learning that is not widely available in mainstream US society. As the internet grows, it opens up more opportunities for this type of learning to occur.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**You Come to Teach** by Lucille Clifton

you come to teach  
and to learn

you do not know  
another's lesson

pay attention to  
what sits inside yourself  
and watches you

you may sometime discover  
which when  
which which

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Coded Language by Saul Williams**

Whereas, breakbeats have been the missing link connecting the diasporic community to its drum woven past

Whereas the quantised drum has allowed the whirling mathematicians to calculate the ever changing distance between rock and stardom

Whereas the velocity of the spinning vinyl, cross-faded, spun backwards, and re-released at the same given moment of recorded history , yet at a different moment in time's continuum has allowed history to catch up with the present.

We do hereby declare reality unkempt by the changing standards of dialogue. Statements, such as, "keep it real", especially when punctuating or anticipating modes of ultra-violence inflicted psychologically or physically or depicting an unchanging rule of events will hence forth be seen as retro-active and not representative of the individually determined is.

Furthermore, as determined by the collective consciousness of this state of being and the lessened distance between thought patterns and their secular manifestations, the role of men as listening receptacles is to be increased by a number no less than 70 percent of the current enlisted as vocal aggressors.

Motherfuckers better realize, now is the time to self-actualize. We have found evidence that hip hop's standard 85 rpm when increased by a number as least half the rate of its standard or decreased at  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its speed may be a determining factor in heightening consciousness.

Studies show that when a given norm is changed in the face of the unchanging, the remaining contradictions will parallel the truth.

Equate rhyme with reason, Sun with season. Our cyclical relationship to phenomenon has encouraged scholars to erase the centers of periods, thus symbolizing the non-linear character of cause and effect. Reject mediocrity!

Your current frequencies of understanding outweigh that which has been given for you to understand. The current standard is the equivalent of an adolescent restricted to the diet of an infant. The rapidly changing body would acquire dysfunctional and deformative symptoms and could not properly mature on a diet of apple sauce and crushed pears.

Light years are interchangeable with years of living in darkness. The role of darkness is not to be seen as, or equated with, Ignorance, but with the unknown, and the mysteries of the unseen.

Thus, in the name of:  
ROBESON, GOD'S SON, HURSTON, AHKENATON, HATHSHEPUT, BLACKFOOT,  
HELEN, LENNON, KHALO, KALI, THE THREE MARIAS, TARA, LILITHE, LOURDE,

WHITMAN, BALDWIN, GINSBERG, KAUFMAN, LUMUMBA, GHANDI, GIBRAN,  
SHABAZZ, SIDDHARTHA, MEDUSA, GUEVARA, GUARDSIEFF, RAND, WRIGHT,  
BANNEKER, TUBMAN, HAMER, HOLIDAY, DAVIS, COLTRANE, MORRISON,  
JOPLIN, DUBOIS, CLARKE, SHAKESPEARE, RACHMNINOV, ELLINGTON, CARTER,  
GAYE, HATHOWAY, HENDRIX, KUTL, DICKERSON, RIPPERTON, MARY, ISIS,  
THERESA, PLATH, RUMI, FELLINI, MICHAUX, NOSTRADAMUS, NEFERTITI, LA  
ROCK, SHIVA, GANESHA, YEMAJA, OSHUN, OBATALA, OGUN, KENNEDY, KING,  
FOUR LITTLE GIRLS, HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI, KELLER, BIKO, PERONE, MARLEY,  
COSBY, SHAKUR, THOSE STILL AFLAMED, AND THE COUNTLESS UNNAMED

We claim the present as the pre-sent, as the hereafter. We are unraveling our navels so  
that we may ingest the sun. We are not afraid of the darkness, we trust that the moon  
shall guide us We are determining the future at this very moment. We now know that the  
heart is the philosophers' stone

Our music is our alchemy. We stand as the manifested equivalent of 3 buckets of water  
and a handful of minerals, thus realizing that those very buckets turned upside down  
supply the percussion factor of forever.

If you must count to keep the beat then count. Find your mantra and awaken your  
subconscious. Curve your circles counterclockwise. Use your cipher to decipher, Coded  
Language, man made laws.

Climb waterfalls and trees, commune with nature, snakes and bees. Let your children  
name themselves and claim themselves as the new day for today we are determined to  
be the channelers of these changing frequencies into songs, paintings, writings, dance,  
drama, photography, carpentry, crafts, love, and love.

We enlist every instrument: Acoustic, electronic. Every so-called race, gender, and  
sexual preference. Every per-son as beings of sound to acknowledge their responsibility  
to uplift the consciousness of the entire fucking World.

Any utterance will be un-aimed, will be disclaimed - two rappers slain

Any utterance will be un-aimed, will be disclaimed - two rappers slain

Retrieved from <http://www.lyricstime.com/saul-williams-coded-language-lyrics.html>

**APPENDIX C**  
**To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals, Never to Look a Hot**  
**Comb in the Teeth** by Gwendolyn Brooks

Sisters!  
I love you.  
Because you love you.  
Because you are erect.  
Because you are also bent.  
In season, stern, kind.  
Crisp, soft -in season.  
And you withhold.  
And you extend.  
And you Step out.  
And you go back.  
And you extend again.  
Your eyes, loud-soft, with crying and  
with smiles,  
are older than a million years.  
And they are young.  
You reach, in season.  
You subside, in season.  
And ALL  
below the richrough righttime of your hair.

You have not bought Blondine.  
You have not hailed the hot-comb recently.  
You never worshipped Marilyn Monroe.  
You say: Farrah's hair is hers.  
You have not wanted to be white.  
Nor have you testified to adoration of that  
state with the advertisement of imitation  
(never successful because the hot-comb is laughing too.)  
But oh, the rough dark Other music!  
the Real,  
the Right.  
The natural Respect of Self and Seal!  
Sisters!  
Your hair is Celebration in the world!

Retrieved from <http://occonline.occ.cccd.edu/online/faculty/OtherPage.cfm?PageID=313>

**APPENDIX D**  
**Who Said It Was Simple?** by Audre Lorde

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter  
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks  
the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.  
An almost white counterwoman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.  
But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in colour  
as well as sex

and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations.

Retrieved from The Poetry Foundation <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=171295>

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Kinks.com Member Terms of Use**

By registering for and participating on Nappturality.com and forums, you agree to these terms and conditions that apply to your use of the discussion forums. These terms and conditions of use apply to the "**Forum**" and "**Blog**" discussion areas, and to any similar features that may be implemented in this website from time to time, including (but not limited to) any chat rooms. All of these features are comprised in the term "discussion forums" in these terms and conditions. These terms of use and the other notices on this site (general Terms of Use, Privacy Policy and Disclaimer) may change from time to time. These changes are at the sole discretion of the manager of the Kinks.com website. You should review all of these terms of use and other notices regularly in order to apprise yourself of any such changes.

You acknowledge that the views of persons posting queries, comments and statements to the discussion forums are not necessarily the views of Kinks.com, and are not necessarily endorsed by Kinks.com. The discussion forums are intended to be a medium for the exchange of information between, and points of view of, many people, and these are the points of view and statements, opinions or questions of those individuals and not of Kinks.com. Divergent points of view can provide for vigorous and refreshing debate within online forums, and while you will not always agree with another user's opinion, it is courteous to remember that each user is entitled to his or her own viewpoint.

In your use of the discussion forums, you should be courteous to persons whom you may be interacting with and to anyone who is the subject of your posting. You must not use the discussion forums to engage in any illegal activity, any civil wrong or tort or any other activity that may cause loss or damage to another person. The general terms and conditions of using this website apply to your use of the discussion forums, and they advise that you will be responsible for the loss or damage caused to any person by use of this website (including the discussion forums) and which is in contravention of any of the terms and conditions that govern use of this website and the discussion forums. You agree to indemnify Kinks.com in relation to any loss or damage incurred by Kinks.com and any liability to a third party that accrues to Kinks.com as a result of your use of this website and the discussion forums in contravention of these terms and conditions.

Without limiting the activities which may be prohibited by these conditions by virtue of them

constituting offences against the criminal or civil law, you must not post any material to this website that:

- is deemed to be racist, pornographic, excessively violent or illegal;
- is endorsing the use of relaxers or any product or technique against Kinks.com policy;
- consists of links to illegal or pornographic websites;
- encourages piracy;
- comprises a false or misleading statement or representation;
- constitutes misleading or deceptive conduct;
- is defamatory;
- is a breach of copyright or other intellectual property right;
- contravenes a court order;
- constitutes a breach of confidence or contract;
- exhorts or counsels any person to commit an offence against the criminal or civil law;
- In addition, you must not use the discussion forums for commercial purposes.

You may post to discussion forums only under your own username and you must not utilize those forums in a manner by which you purport to be someone else.

At all times, you should maintain an awareness that a range of people from many different backgrounds, of very different ages, and with differing levels of familiarity with topic matters and with the computing environment will be reading and posting to these discussion forums.

Kinks.com reserves the right to remove any postings to the discussion forums that contravene any of the limitations referred to above, which contain expletives or foul language, which are considered to be discourteous or which otherwise the managers of the Kinks.com website in their sole discretion consider to be inappropriate for inclusion in the forums, and this may be done without any prior notice to the person who has contributed that posting.























Kinks.com reserves the right to suspend or cancel the registration of any user who contravenes any of the terms and conditions that apply to use of this website and the discussion forums.

By registering and posting to our public and private areas, you agree to all the terms above.
























## APPENDIX F

### Kinks.com Emoticon/Smiley Chart

Code	Image
:mellow:	
:huh:	
^_^	
:o	
;)	
:P	
:D	
:lol:	
B)	
:rolleyes:	
^-^	
<_<	
:)	
:wub:	
:angry:	
:(	
:unsure:	
:wacko:	
:blink:	
:ninj:	
:blush:	
:excl:	

:soapbox:	
:doh	
:afro:	
:shocker:	
:2cents:	
:Angry:	
:boohoo:	
:bolt:	
:Cool_049:	
:dunno:	
:horse:	
:help:	
:hug:	
:icon_peek13:	
:icon_heartpump:	
:icon_headshake:	
:icon_ShiftyEye:	
:icon_thinkerg:	
:icon_twak:	
:lipsrsealed:	
:Male:	
:pointlaugh:	

:puke2:	 
:fan:	
:pop:	
:bow:	
:offtop:	
:clap:	
:hug:	
:blah:	BLAH 
:yawn2:	
:crying:	
:acksmiley:	
:brickwall:	
:pinch:	
:winkkiss:	
:ban:	
:surrender:	
:taz:	
:noway:	
:whistling:	
:yes:	



:)



)8-|



:huh:



;)



:(



:-))



:D



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:(o)



8)



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:p



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(8o



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